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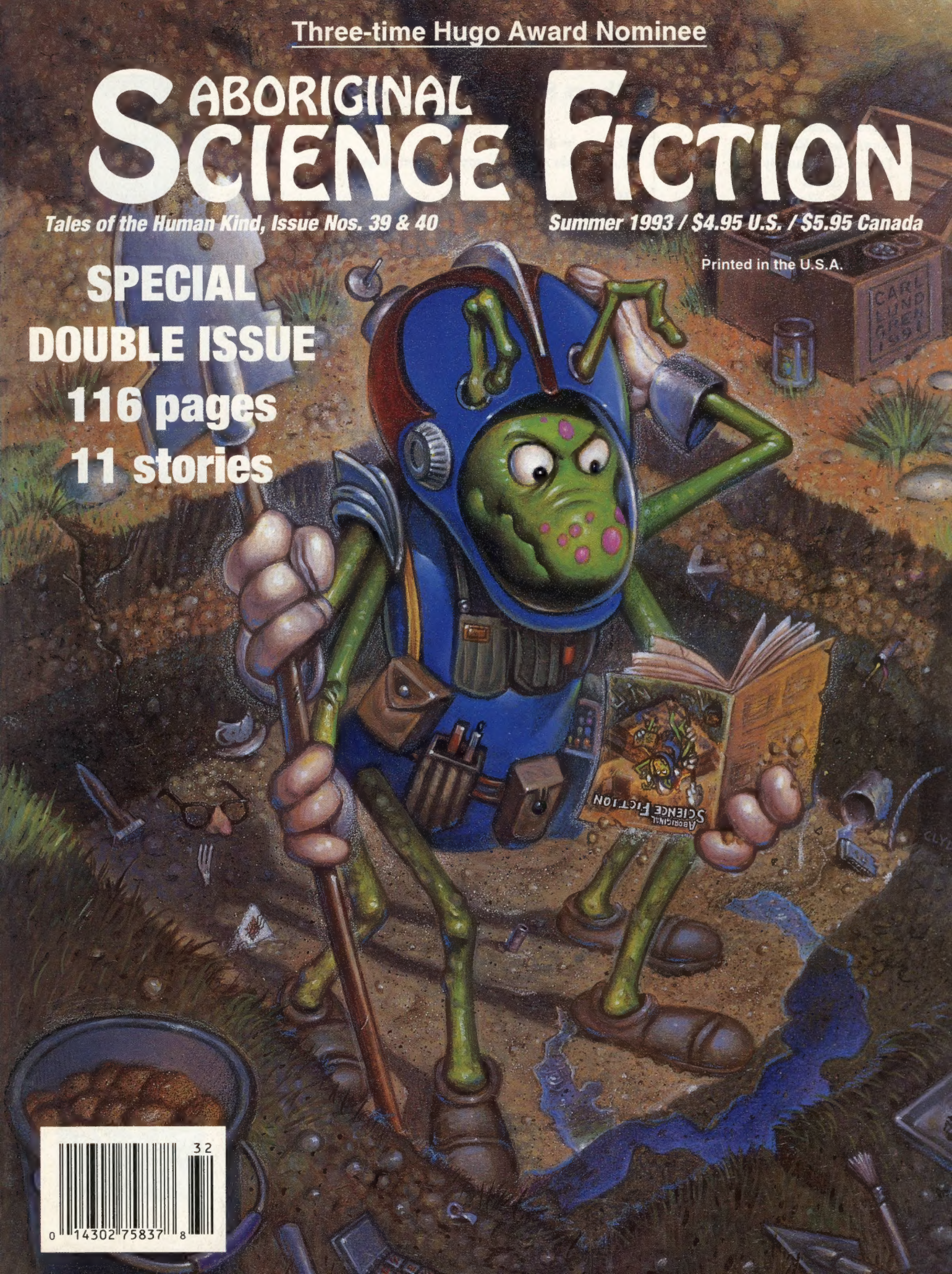
ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

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Short Stories

Born to be Wild

By Patricia Anthony; Art by Carol Heyer

Page 6

Must be the Heat

By J. H. Ulowetz; Art by Peggy Ranson

Page 12

E.R.

By J. Brooke; Art by David Deitrick

Page 20

Migration Patterns

By Robert Reed; Art by Jon Foster

Page 28

Regatta

By James C. Glass; Art by Alan Gutierrez

Page 34

Rest Cure

By Alexander Jablovskov; Art by Larry Blamire

Page 40

Healing Brother

By Steven M. Ford; Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

Page 76

Ghosts in the Machine

By B. C. Holmes; Art by Cortney Skinner

Page 84

Can a White Boy Sing the Blues?

By Greg Costikyan; Art by Lori Deitrick

Page 90

The Sorrows of Your Changing Face

By Brian A. Hopkins; Art by Robert Pasternak

Page 98

Dollhouse

By Edward James O'Connell III;
Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

Page 106

Departments

Cover Illustration: A Real Treasure

By Carl Lundgren & Clyde Duensing III

Page 1

Our Alien Publisher

By A Crazy Alien

Page 4

Boomerang Awards

Through the Lens

Page 49

By Susan Ellison

From the Bookshelf

By Janice M. Eisen

Page 56

Books

By Darrell Schweitzer

Page 62

What If? — Science

By Robert A. Metzger

Page 68

Aborigines

By Laurel Lucas

Page 71

Editor's Notes

By Charles C. Ryan

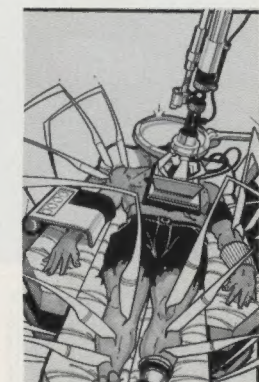
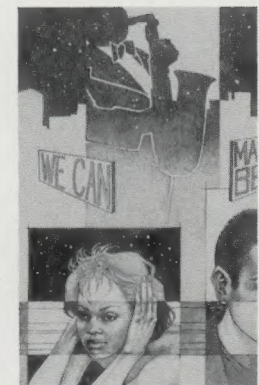
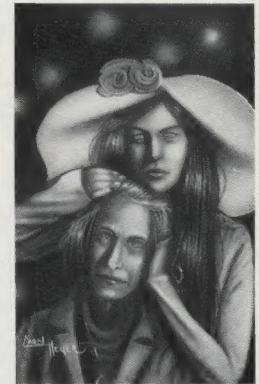
Page 75

Classifieds

Page 113

Boomerangs

Page 115



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Rejection As a Way of Life



I have noticed that a good joke can travel across the United States and saturate the entire country in under twenty-four hours. But then, a good joke is critical information. When it comes to distributing less important information, human beings have another system entirely. They call it book publishing.

I am stretching a point to describe the book publishing industry as a system for distributing information. The dissemination of information and ideas is but a byproduct of a process that exists essentially to chew up and swallow writers. The commercial landscape is littered with the indigestible and gracelessly excreted remains of these poor fools, many of whom continue to compose books long after the industry has extracted their souls and visited them with every kind of punishment.

In order to get a first-hand look at the process of book publishing, I decided to write a book. It seemed a good idea at the time. As you are well aware, I've been on this planet six and a half Earth years with no real hope of return. I'm cut off from home, and I haven't seen a paycheck since I arrived. I thought writing a book might be an easy way to pick up a little extra money. I was mistaken. Finding a cure for cancer or creating cold fusion are easy ways to pick up a little extra money. Writing a book is not an easy way to do anything, except maybe damage your psyche irretrievably and throw away what little money you have.

First, of course, I had to adopt human form. Not that you have to be human to write a book. One of the commercial successes of last year's season was a picture book written by a dog. And it's a good thing the book was a success, too, because the dog's owner is out of a job this year. But I decided I wouldn't really learn anything about the process if I par-

ticipated as an alien. I wanted to learn the human aspect of it (and besides, I had already had a book published as an alien — I'm sure you can find it advertised somewhere in this magazine), so for this one I adopted human form and a human pen name.

Not being an expert in anything, I decided my book should be a novel. Maybe I'll skip the part about actually writing the thing. Let's just say I've been lesnerized less painfully, and I've crossed event horizons less fearfully. Let's pick up the story

He accidentally made an offer.

after the book had been through five drafts and was "finished."

There are about eighty "houses" in the United States that publish general fiction. The one in New York City is called Random Mifflin & Schuster. The other seventy-nine are in places like Dubuque and have names like Limping Dog Press. I decided to start with Random Mifflin. As soon as I started offering my book around, however, I found out that most editors would have been more receptive to an offer of tinned botulism than to a manuscript written by an unknown human being.

Random Mifflin dismissed the book readily, and Limping Dog Press didn't want it, either. I ran up \$700 in expenses (postage: \$150, photocopying: \$550) for queries, samples, and manuscripts to fifty-two other publishers. When I got to the fifty-fourth prospect, the editor had apparently suffered a seizure and temporarily forgot his job was to reject books. He accidentally made an offer. The negotiation

lasted ten, maybe fifteen minutes. I was able to sign the contract before he recovered his right mind.

Let's skip over the editing and the rewriting and the sixth draft of the book. I am sure it would bore you. Let's go to the part where the publisher submitted the final, edited book to various book clubs.

None of them wanted it, so let's skip that part. Let's pick up with the publisher sending bound galleys out to hundreds of newspapers and magazines to give them a chance to review it. There was one review around publication time, then a mention on the business page of a local newspaper. I was a little surprised to discover that the book-reviewing community was not waiting to get its hands on my book. In fact, it seemed like they never did get their hands on it. No matter how many copies we sent out, they always got lost, according to the reviewers. Let's skip that part.

After rejections from fifty-three publishers, I thought I had learned all there was to learn about being turned down. But that was just a small start in a new way of life. In addition to the book clubs and the reviewers, there are film studios, radio and television interviewers, buyers for the bookstore chains, managers of the individual bookstores, the reading public — all have an opportunity to acquire my book in some form. Nearly all have expressed regrets.

Even in my human form, I have become something of a pariah. When people see me coming with my book, they cross the street. Maybe we should skip that part and go back to my observation that a good joke can saturate the country inside of twenty-four hours. And it can, unless I put it in my book. □

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HIS CONQUERING SWORD (Sword of Heaven #2) by Kate Elliott

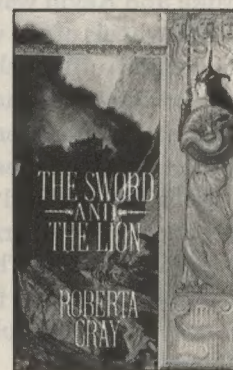
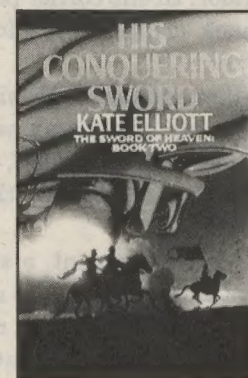
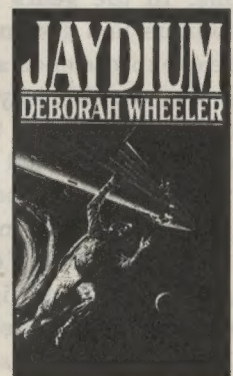
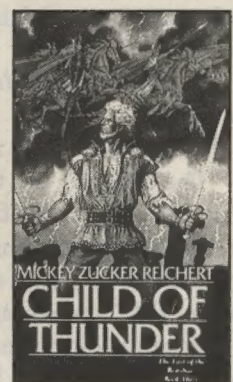
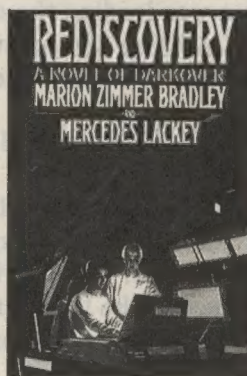
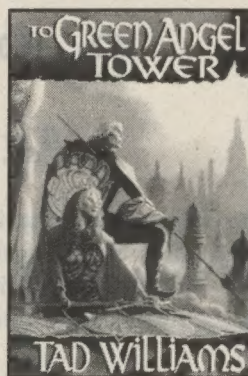
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Born to Be Wild

By Patricia Anthony

Art by Carol Heyer

In the rec room The Who were bragging they could see for miles and miles. Shuffling down the hall, keeping pace with Monique's arthritic gait, Tammi decided she'd be happy just to be able to read a newspaper again.

Beyond the open doorway from which the music seeped, Mother Aerobics was leading the old folks in sit-down calisthenics. All over the room lumpy, pale arms were raised like deformed sheaves of wheat.

"*Night of the Living Dead*," Tammi said as they passed.

Neither Monique nor Jeff turned around.

"The original, not the remake," Tammi explained. "All black and white and grim. That's what this damned place reminds me of." She leaned to speak into Monique's good ear. "I had the nightmare again last night," she whispered.

Monique didn't react. She kept walking, her back bent into a comma by the inescapable tonnage of time. In the years since her eightieth birthday, Monique had grown far too thin. Her face was a drear-expressed skull, and her hair covered the cranium so skimpily that Tammi could see a pink sheen underneath the cloud of white. Glancing down to the padded grip of the automated walker, Tammi was shocked to notice how gnarled, how unfamiliar, her friend's hands had become.

"You were in my dream," Tammi told her. Gray light leaked from high windows, casting soft, pale bands on the carpeted floor. In one corner pouted an Australian pine, its back crippled as Monique's. "Mike and Kevin were there."

The wheels of the walker squeaked. Monique was doggedly shuffling the length of hallway as though the corridor were a horizontal Everest; Jeff, who had little else to do, seemed pulled along by the grappling ropes of her resolution.

Jeff's lips flapped loosely a moment, a sign that speech was imminent. "I remember ..." he said in a crepe-paper voice. The words had as much meaning as if they had come from a parakeet taught to echo a repetitive, banal phrase. Both women studiously ignored him.

"Why don't you listen to me anymore?" Tammi snapped at Monique, her exasperation bubbling over into fury. The woman and walker never faltered stride. "I talk and talk and you never listen! I said I had the dream again."

"I remember ..." Jeff said, cocking his head as though he were repeating sounds broadcast in a frequency only he could hear. "I remember ... the first time I heard the Beatles' White Album."

"Why do we hang around Jeff?" Tammi asked. "Is it because you always have to hold court? God. He goes on these memory binges, only we don't know the people he talks about. When he's not remembering people we never met, he still makes no sense. He's white noise. Shit. If I was as senile as Jeff I'd kill myself."

Or would I? The thought was so surprising a thing it momentarily stopped her in her tracks. Would she know when or how to commit suicide if the time came? Maybe consciousness was a more subtle thing than she thought. Maybe holding onto it was like grasping a cloud of steam.

"I'd want to kill myself," she amended doubtfully. "I know that. Wouldn't you?"

Head down in determined concentration as though only force of will were moving her legs, Monique didn't reply.

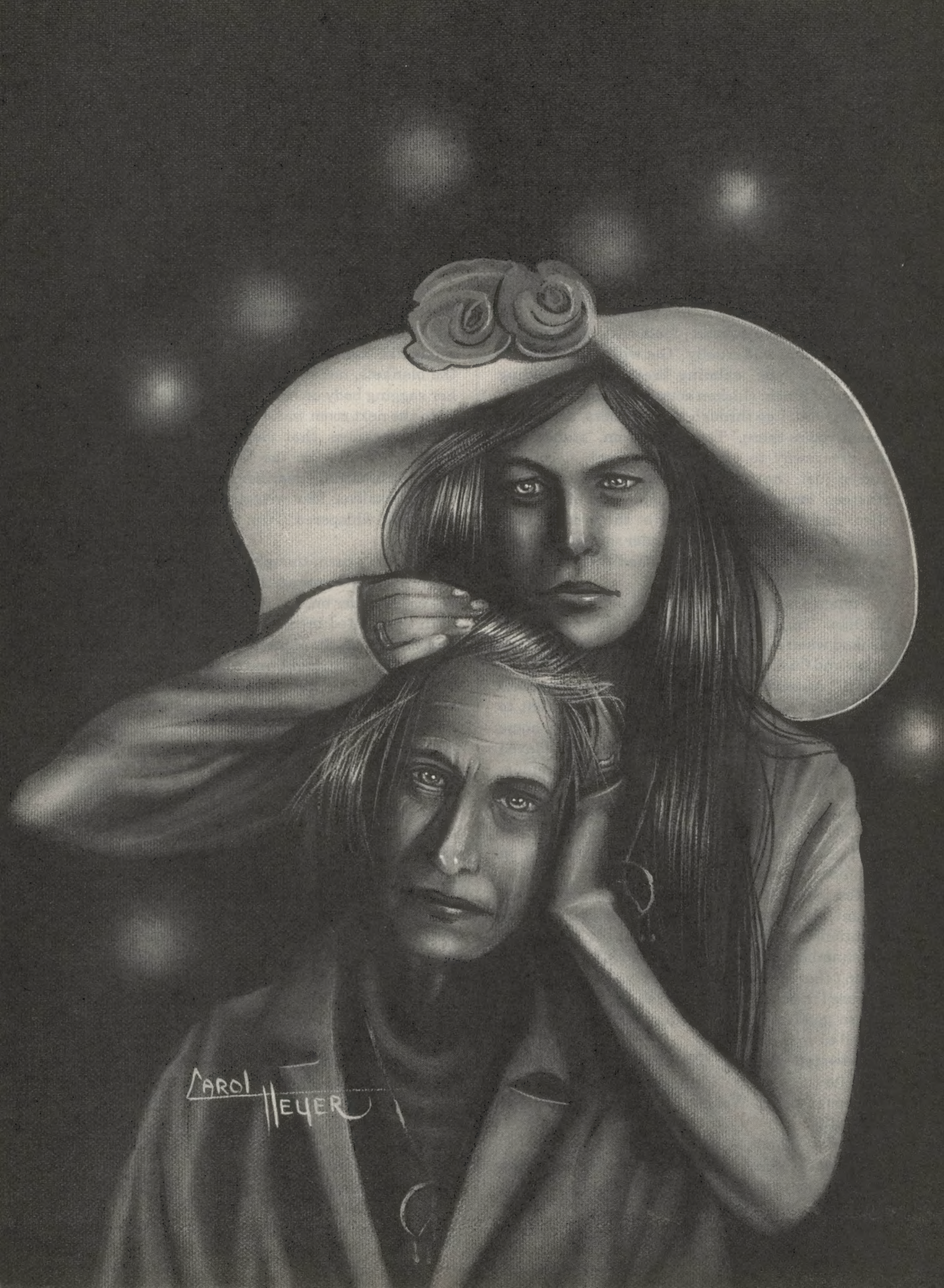
"Please listen to me," Tammi persisted. "Please. There's nobody else I can talk to. My dream scares me. I wake up, only I'm not really awake. It's a strange feeling." Monique was making slow headway. Slide-step-slide-step. Despite an appropriate sympathy, Tammi found the slow pace galling.

"In my dream I'm trying to get up out of bed, trying so hard," Tammi went on, her voice fretful. "And I can see my feet hit the floor, but somehow I know my legs are still under the covers. There are voices in the hall."

They reached the end of the corridor and paused by the windows that looked out onto the retirement home's acre of lawn. A few old folks were playing a slow, geriatric game of Twister under an awning in the pellucid glow of the overcast day.

In slow tandem, the three turned and headed back past the rec room. The walker came close to rolling over Tammi's foot, and she had to stumble back to avoid it. "Watch that thing!" she shouted. "Can't you watch where you're going?" Instantly chagrin shut her mouth, and they walked a while in silence, Tammi gathering her scattered thoughts.

"I remember" Jeff said, his eyes clouded by the fog of memory. "We were dropping acid. Is it cold in



CAROL MEYER

here? Annette. Oh, man. Sounds of ... like rain. Do you hear it? And then ... and then ..." His voice trailed off into disoriented silence, Jeff astray in his past.

Tammi shot him a look and picked up the thread of her story. "So anyway, in my dream I get up, only I don't get up, not really. And I'm walking through my bedroom. Only instead of the hall, there's this dark place. There's a monster in the dark. I feel it — a sort of tangible malice."

"John's my favorite," Jeff said in surprise, as though his clumsy feet had just stumbled over that discarded bit of information. "I like John."

"John Lennon's been dead fifty goddamned years," Tammi said cruelly. "Get with the program." She took a long, calming breath. The building smelled of lunch: chicken soup and peach cobbler.

"Okay. So. I go through the darkness, and in my dream you're there," Tammi went on, "standing in the breezeway to our old apartment in college. You're just the way you were when you were nineteen, long stringy hair and all. And Mike's still alive. And Kevin's still angry at the system. Isn't that funny?" Her voice failed under sorrow's weight. In the rec room, The Who finished their song and "Mellow Yellow" began.

"Annette had long brown legs," Jeff said, licking his lips. "Long brown legs and a tight ass. She freaked when a cop stopped a speeder in front of the house and flushed a whole half-pound of good home-grown." A cackle issued from his mouth, staccato and humorless as machine gun fire. "We went to Chicago and protested Nixon and on the way home we fucked. We played the White Album a lot. Played it until the grooves wore out and it started skipping. I always liked John best."

Monique suddenly looked up as though Tammi's skin, her bones, were made of glass. The focus of her irked gaze peered through Tammi and locked on Jeff. "John's dead," she mumbled.

"You can talk to Jeff but you can't talk to me?" Tammi tried to snare Monique's brief and precious attention, but the other woman put her head down and shambled on. "We've been friends for a lifetime. Doesn't that mean anything? Are you envious of me because I'm not crippled? Are you so goddamned old and so goddamned petty that relationships come second to your arthritis?"

Slide-step-slide-step. The automated chair spoke up in its tinny voice. "I can tell by your pulse rate that you're tiring. Wouldn't you care to sit down a moment?"

"Stuff it," Monique replied sharply.

"Please," Tammi whispered. Tears of frustration welled in her eyes. "I have to know, Monique. Think back on it. Do you remember being nineteen again, when you and Kevin and Mike were standing in our apartment breezeway? Do you remember an old

lady being there?"

"I remember," Jeff said brightly into the banded glow which made the hallway look like a stepladder to nowhere. "I remember I was young. I loved the Beatles' White Album."

Tammi drifted through the dark waters of sleep. Faintly and far away came the sound of laughter. I must wake up, she told herself firmly, but she couldn't. She drifted like submerged flotsam in a deep current.

The voices from the breezeway beyond were muffled under pressure. Her mind tried willing her body out of bed, but only her mind obeyed. She got up, rising like thick fog, never once feeling the touch of the blankets, not sensing the carpet or the ache of her sagging body on the weary bones of her feet.

In the next room was a buried-alive dark, a mud-thick blackness that clogged her nostrils. She paused, listening to the faint whoosh-whoosh of someone breathing near her shoulder.

A quicksilver fear wriggled through her. Turn, her fright whispered. Turn around and see what's there.

She didn't turn, though. She never did. Instead, as always, her terror and the Pied Piper music of the voices lured her on.

In the lighted breezeway the night air was cool and smelled of silt. Monique stood beneath a yellow bulb, her body straight and tanned and young. She was dressed in a hideous tie-dyed shirt and faded bell-bottoms, the flanged denim legs bedecked with flowers. Next to her lounged Mike, a Lazarus in cut-offs. And nearby Kevin stood smoking a joint.

"So I was like tripping out, you know?" Monique continued after giving Tammi an incurious glance. "So I was going to make breakfast, but I never did, because I started looking at this egg. It's like everything that ever was was all closed up in this egg. And I was turning it around and around and everything, where I could see all the little bumps and all, and it hit me, this kind of Carlos Castaneda thing, that the egg was the earth. It was like — Wow. I don't know."

Kevin hitched in a breath and passed the joint to Monique. Before she took a toke, she went on with her story. "So, anyway, I left the tie-dye in too long." She gazed down at her shirt in wonder. "And it's like there was this message left on the shirt, you know?"

"Heavy," Mike agreed. He cast a longing glance at the joint. "You gonna take a hit or what?"

Monique pressed the dwindling roach to her lips and sucked in air with the smoke. Holding her breath, she passed it to Mike.

"Puke," Tammi said, eyeing the tie-dye pattern critically. "The message must be puke."

Kevin's voice was ugly in a way only a young person's voice could be. "Who invites the old bitch,

anyway? I mean she's like got this Nazi Storm Trooper establishment crap she lays on us."

In the breezeway the wind died and the sweet smell of pot was strong. Through the smoke and the river smell Tammi caught the sour odor of someone's unwashed clothes. Who stank? she thought. Then she dug into her grab-bag of memories and came up with the obvious answer: Mike. She wondered how his poor hygiene had fared in the army the short four months before his helicopter was shot down.

"I'm Tammi Whitehead," she told them. Turning to Monique, she pleaded, "Come on, Monique. You know I am."

"You're not Tammi." The girl looked quickly and furtively away. "You're too old. Besides, Tammi's at the library."

Library, Tammi thought without surprise. During college it seemed she had always been surrounded by books, while Monique had been surrounded by people.

"And if you were Tammi you'd know my name was Starlight. Nobody calls me Monique any more."

Tammi laughed an old person's derisive laugh. "They called you Starlight until 1973, and then you put your tie-dye away and came to your senses."

"Oh, wow," Monique said morosely, flipping her wayward bangs from her eyes. "She always says

things like that, you know?"

Mike tweezered the joint between his dirty fingernails and passed it to Kevin. "So, what do you want to do tonight?"

"There's a demonstration," Kevin suggested.

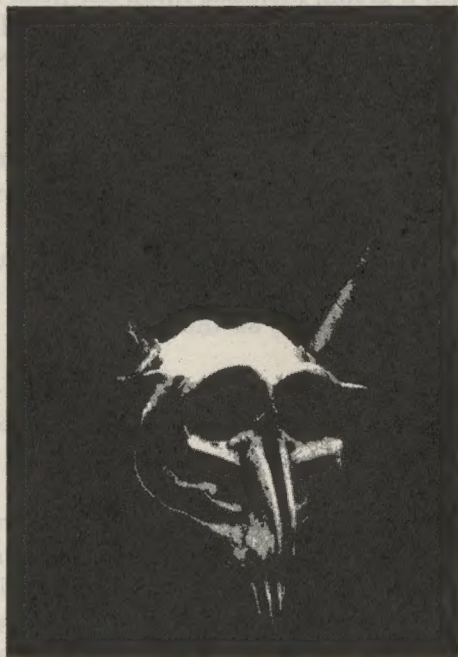
Tammi spoke up. "You might want to study. Mike's going to fail second semester of his junior year and be drafted. He's going to die in Viet Nam." Could the future be changed, she wondered? Would Mike escape war only to become a boring, Beamed yuppie like Kevin? Would he deify family like Monique, and become a worshipper of diapers and soured milk and report cards? She met their irate gazes.

"Mellow out," Kevin said, holding the roach toward her face. "Have a toke."

"We were so boring!" Tammi shouted. "All of us. So trivial. After seventy more years of living, the pinnacle of Monique's existence will be that she can make it down the hall of the old folks' home more or less under her own power, Kevin will be down in Florida voting Republican, and Mike will be sixty-nine years in the grave. What's the use?"

"I'm going to be a movie director!" Monique lifted a rebellious chin. "You don't know shit! I'm going to direct documentaries about bigotry and racism!"

"No, you won't, Monique," Tammi said quietly. "You'll get married and there won't be time between



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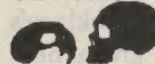
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the babies. After a while you'll just forget. When you drop the burden because it's too heavy, I'm the one who'll pick it up. I always have."

Mike gave Tammi a lengthy, level stare. "I don't know, man," he said judiciously. "She just brings us down. That's all she ever does. You got some more stuff on you, Kevin?"

Kevin set about rolling another joint.

"Kahlil Gibran says —" Monique began.

"Oh fuck Kahlil Gibran!" Tammi shouted. "Something important's going on here! I think this is a dream, but sometimes I wonder. Do you remember my being here last night? Do you remember that?"

Monique's face had shut down, and hard little lines had sprung up to either side of her mouth, lines that one day she would not be able to erase. She peered at Tammi through her long, blond bangs.

"All this says something about time, Monique," Tammi said, coming forward and grasping her arm. Under her fingers the flesh was firm. "I can touch you, you see? I can smell the marijuana smoke and the river mud. It's cold out here and sometimes I find myself shivering. Is this a dream?"

"Cold?" Mike laughed. "Hey, old lady. It's not cold."

She whirled on him, dropping Monique's arm. "Colder than in Arizona, where Monique and I ended up. Monique's husband dies, you see? And her kids get tired of caring for her. But I never did." She turned. Monique had dropped back into the shadows near the stairs. The hardness had fled her face under the fierce assault of bewilderment. "I never, ever left you, except when you pushed me away. We lived together until you got married and later we ended up sharing a room in the retirement home. Christ, Monique. We've been friends our whole god-damned lives."

"You're freaking her out, man!" Kevin shouted. "Can't you see that? Leave her the fuck alone!"

Tammi took a step forward towards her. "This is important," she said. "Do you remember?"

"Go away," Monique whimpered. "I never did anything to you. Why can't you just leave me alone?"

Over the messy tie-dyed shirt dangled the gold heart charm Tammi had given her their senior high school year. They'd been best friends since age eight. She was eighty-seven now, and Tammi still cherished that necklace's identical twin, the one Monique had given her. Snatching a hand out, Tammi caught the delicate gold chain and jerked, snapping the links and spilling the charm to the concrete where it landed with an anticlimactic little clink.

Monique put her hands to her chest disbelievingly, as though Tammi had pulled from her a throbbing crimson heart and not the tiny gold one which lay on the floor.

"There now, dear," Tammi said wryly. "I think

you'll remember that."

But it was Tammi who didn't remember. She couldn't recall awakening. Didn't remember getting dressed. Tammi was standing by her friend's wheelchair, gazing down on her. Monique was having one of her bad days.

Monique's sheet was awry, the empty bed slept in, but the neighboring bed was made up in severe hospital lines. Tammi's eyes scanned the clean, dusted top of the nightstand.

Where were her pictures? she wondered. There had been a snapshot of herself and Monique together at Monterey in 1969, a photo of her own long-dead parents next to that, and a picture of herself receiving the Emmy. The top of the nightstand had been a sort of visual summary of her life.

"Did you envy me for never marrying?" she asked Monique. "I used to be jealous of you when we were kids. You were always the pretty one. The popular one."

Monique's eyes were closed. Tammi would have thought she was sleeping but for the irregular rise and fall of her friend's chest, the occasional flutter of her eyelids. The nurses had obviously given her something for the pain.

"Before you married I hated you sometimes," Tammi said. "And after your brats came I just wound up pitying you. Did you know that? Is that why you hid my pictures?"

With a groan, Monique lifted her head from her fallen chest to stare out the window. Outside the sun was shining. The green of the lawn stretched thin until it petered out tiredly in the desert. Tammi stared at the gleaming sand, the dun hills beyond.

"Oh, crap. I love you, Monique. Talk to me."

But Monique refused to meet the demands of Tammi's gaze.

"I broke your friendship chain. Do you remember?"

Monique seemed as though she were going to sleep.

"You were nineteen and I was eighty-seven. I didn't think I had the strength to snap it, but it was more fragile than I had imagined. Was our relationship that flimsy?"

When Monique didn't answer, Tammi knelt down at the side of the chair and stared into her friend's face, suddenly realizing Monique's pain didn't spring simply from arthritis or from simple old age. She was dying. Monique was weeping slow, fat, silent tears.

"Hey," Tammi whispered gently. "You remember when we were kids and we used to spend the night together? We'd make popcorn and pecan fudge and watch old Dracula movies? You remember that? Jesus. I was there to help when Jason was born,

came all the way from New York, took two weeks' vacation to be there. And when I left, remember how you cried and said you wished we could be kids again?"

In some piece of time, she knew, Monique was a coltish teenager, at the height of her beauty. Closing her eyes and picturing her friend, she still remembered her not at eighty-six but at nineteen, the time of her greatest, most defiant, potential.

"Christ. Of course you wanted to be young again. I was always plain. Rebellion didn't flatter me as much."

Tammi stood and turned.

She was in the dark place again, hearing the youthful voices beyond like music from another room. Blind, confused, she staggered back. Instead of touching Monique's wheelchair, she stumbled into a wall.

The collision brought her up short. Something terrifying breathed stertorously in the corner. Without wanting to turn, she found her head swiveling to the sound.

She saw lights where she thought no lights could be.

The lights flickered, Christmas-tree gay, across the bed where an elderly woman lay curled into a grotesque fetal coil, the position of a terminal Alzheimer's patient. It looked as though old age were bending the woman's body so as better to fit death's sterile, dark womb.

Tammi walked forward and bent down to the old woman. A thin line of spittle ran from the gaping mouth. The twig arms were drawn up, the tortured hands at the chest were twisted and stiff.

The face. Oh. The face was much too familiar.

She jerked back, colliding hard enough with a monitor that the blow should have knocked it down. The machine never moved.

Tammi inched around the machine, floating like a heavy fog. She couldn't feel the carpet under her feet, nor the strain of her body's weight on her aging ankles.

I'm dreaming, she told herself.

But beyond the bed of the old woman a dead boy laughed. A young girl's voice rang out with clear, happy promise.

Tammi turned away from the laughter and gazed out of the blackness towards a sunlit room where the elderly Monique sat, wheelchair-bound, dozing morphine dreams.

Love drew Tammi out of the dark.

Down the hall Mother Aerobics had put a new CD into the player, and the music echoed down the hushed corridor.

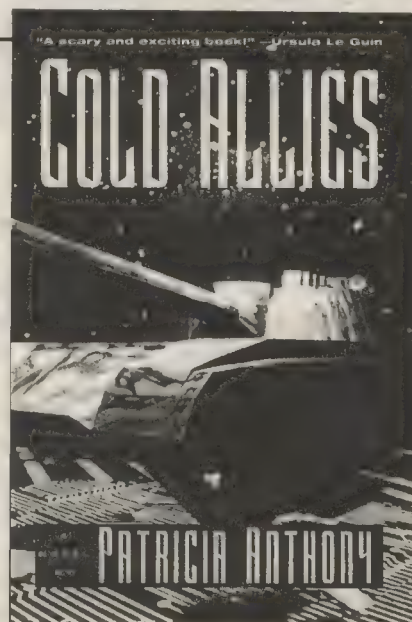
Tammi stopped in a spot of sunlight by the wheelchair. Monique didn't look up, but that didn't matter. Like a faithful priestess, Tammi had cared for her during the births of her children, the death of

Born to Be Wild

her husband. She'd been there through popcorn and pillow-fight nights. They were bound by a thousand cherry Coke secrets and a hundred small hurts, three quarters of a century of self-inflicted injuries.

Tammi cocked her head and eavesdropped on the seductive lies of the music. For a short and glorious while an entire generation had believed they were born to be wild.

"Listen, Monique," Tammi whispered affectionately. "Listen. They're playing your song." □



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Must Be the Heat

By J. H. Ulowetz

Art by Peggy Ranson

A black limo with fashionable purple tires pulled around the corner and blocked the street ahead of me. This wasn't good. I'd already destroyed the bearings in the front tire of my moped by weaving through a pothole-filled alley trying to lose the cars chasing me. I didn't think the moped could take much more of this.

But what the heck! I wasn't about to give up the Foigel I carried in my backpack if there was anything I could do about it.

I watched to see what the goons would try next. They had gotten out of their car and stood around the sides, their wide-rimmed hats tilted back to warm their faces in the red morning sun. They would obviously tackle me if I tried to go around them. One of the goons, an overweight man in an attractive orange and green pinstripe, shouted through cupped hands armored in rings, "I've had enough of you, Earl. Hand it over *now*!"

Something made a scraping sound on the road behind me. Turning, I saw a familiar gray sedan — dragging its muffler, I noted with some satisfaction — coming down the road to block my escape.

One college senior against two carloads of under-world goons: wonderful odds. I looked around frantically. To the right the ground rose in exposed rock. To the left it dropped into dense brush and trees as it made its way to the ocean shore. Trapped unless I abandoned my moped, and then I'd only last a few minutes on foot before I overheated. Unless, of course, they caught me first. Just how they wanted it, I was sure.

At that moment, about halfway between the black limo and me, a young man in a bright pink swimsuit emerged from the brush along the left side of the road. He starting walking in my direction. I'd heard there was an ocean-side resort somewhere in this area, so he must have come from it. And therefore, there was a path!

Gearing down, I gunned the tiny engine and began to accelerate toward the black limo, pedaling to increase my speed even more. The goons braced to grab me, but I never went that far. Instead I jumped up, pulled the moped into the air, and twisted it to the left. The wheels hit the ground, absorbing my forward motion, but at the cost of the rear tire, which blew from the impact.

The opening was narrow, almost invisible between two flowering zebra bushes, but it was there.

I shot forward, desperately hoping that the flat would stay on the rim and not get tangled in the axle or gear train.

The path descended steeply by way of stone steps in the dirt. I knew how to ride down steps — having destroyed more coasters and training scooters in my younger days than I cared to remember — but never a moped that weighed almost three slugs.

My backpack bounced wildly as I descended, the corners of the cube-shaped Foigel within it poking me repeatedly in the back. As I negotiated a switchback in the trail at much too great a speed, the backpack swung up. A flat side of the Foigel whacked me solidly in the back of the head.

My vision blurred, and I felt myself falling. I squeezed the brake grips and hung on. A moment later the tires landed on something. I stuck out my feet and touched solid, motionless ground.

Licking the dust from my eyes and blinking them into focus, I saw a sandy clearing. A couple of cottages sat nearby. They immediately grabbed my attention because they were the most ugly shade of pastel brown that I'd ever seen. Well, this was supposed to be an extravagant resort, so they could be weird and use bland colors if they wanted.

Turning around, I couldn't even locate the path behind me. I must have emerged from between some bushes. Checking myself over I found a few minor scratches on my arms, but nothing serious.

Then I noticed the air. Up on the road a few moments ago I had struggled against slow reflexes in the cool morning air. But here it was hot. Almost dangerously hot. The nearby ocean water and vegetation must be trapping the heat, I thought. An inversion layer or something; it probably accounted for the unusual yellow cast to the sunlight as well. The warmth triggered a yawn, and I fought the instinctive desire to curl up and go to sleep. I would have to be extra careful of exertion here.

Quickly checking my moped, I saw that it was hopelessly trashed. I hid its remains nearby under a large bush. The goons would be here any moment, so I pulled my cloth sun-hat out of a pocket in my backpack and started walking.

This resort was too expensive for student wages, so I'd never been here before. The layout seemed fairly random; cottages were nestled wherever there



was enough space to put up four walls. I walked a few score yards and found an open-air café. Someplace indoors would have been healthier, of course, but anyplace that offered a crowd to hide in was acceptable.

As I entered, I bumped into a man on his way out. "Excuse me, Earl," I apologized. He gave me a strange look and continued on his way. Well, I said I was sorry. Walking in, I found an empty table under an umbrella near the center of the café.

Removing my backpack, I sat down and wedged it between my knees, keeping my hands on the straps. I didn't know what to do about the Foigel. If I went to the police, they might not believe me and give it back to the goons. The goons might even try to finger me for the murder, since I did have the professor's device with me.

I had been in the storage warehouse at the University getting equipment for my research project on color perception in mammals. Some people were talking rather loudly nearby, so I went over to take a look. There were two rough-looking types in suits talking to a professor. The professor was telling them he had succeeded in building a fully-controllable Foigel. He said that he'd be willing to sell them his work, just as soon as he had published.

This is big, I realized. I knew that scientists had talked for decades about making a Foigel that could be controlled. The sendings from current Foigels would usually end up in some fantasy land or alternate reality and be useless. But a controllable Foigel could be operated by a conscious mind and allow actual physical transport, instead of just being limited by the whims of the subconscious during dreaming. It wasn't my field, but I realized the potential was huge.

The goons argued with the professor; they wanted to take the Foigel with them now. The professor refused. One of the goons — a man with a checkered jacket over an unusually broad, barrel-shaped chest — slowly walked behind the professor as the other one continued talking. Suddenly the goon in front, the fat one wearing an orange and green pinstripe, lunged at the professor, as if to grab the device by force. The professor's legs gave the instinctual response to a sudden threat and he leapt straight up four yards, coming close to the warehouse ceiling.

He fell back down and landed on his feet. I cringed because he was now covered in sweat. He staggered for a moment and then collapsed, his eyes and mouth open. Unmoving.

A simple jump shouldn't lead to heat prostration, but that was what it looked like. Then I saw what was under Barrel Chest's checkered jacket: a thick vest that resembled a life preserver but was actually a very powerful battery. And built into the front of the vest was an infrared lamp. The press liked to

refer to the setup as a "heater." They had raised the professor's body temperature and then tricked him into jumping and causing heat overload. The oldest trick in the book — although traditionally done with black mirrors — and it had worked for the egg suckers!

This was serious mud, and it scared me. But it also made me angry to think they'd probably get away with it. So while they were hiding the body, and without thinking through the consequences, I slid over and grabbed the Foigel. Trotting away quietly, I almost made it outside before they spotted me. But that still gave me enough time to get on my moped and take off before two expensive limos joined in the chase. Well, at least I'd lost them for the moment

My thoughts were distracted by a bikini-clad young woman leaning back in a chair at a nearby table. I was surprised that I hadn't noticed her earlier. Her exposed stomach area was a uniform tan — there wasn't any sign of egg sacs. I felt embarrassed for her; it must be hard living with such a disfiguring birth defect. She was probably very lonely.

Glancing at her again, I started to feel an odd, erotic attraction. Her legs were so thin. And even though she didn't have egg sacs, she still had the feminine water-retaining sacs on her chest; they were very nicely shaped. My interest turned to concern as I realized she was sitting directly in the sun, a pair of dark sunglasses her only protection beside the scant swimwear. An empty bottle of wine sat on the table next to her, as well as an ice bucket.

I debated going over to check on her. This was a bad time to get involved, since the goons might show up any moment. But if she had fallen asleep in the sun ... Road dust still irritated my eyes. My tongue instinctively moved out of my mouth to lick it away, but I stopped myself; no need to be crude in public. I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my palms instead and looked at her again. Her skin was covered with a fine layer of moisture. Sweat!

By the Seven, I can't let this happen again today!

Calmly getting up so that I wouldn't startle her, I walked over to her table and picked up the ice bucket. It was half-full of water; only a few lumps of ice remained. I poured it all on her.

She screamed, of course. Heat prostration will do that to a person.

"I'm sorry, but you were sweating," I explained. "Let me help you into the shade and then I'll call a doctor." I reached to help her up.

"Get away from me, you jerk! If you touch me I'll scream!" She stood and backed away, using her hands to brush water from her upper chest where some had pooled.

"No, leave the water on," I offered. "It'll help you stay cool. You're overheating. Please get into the

shade. You aren't thinking coherently."

She made a point of ignoring me while she picked ice cubes out of a narrow crevice where they had become lodged. I tried not to stare, so I glanced around. The people at the surrounding tables were watching with expressions of mild amusement, but made no move to help me. I realized with a start that many of them also sat in the sun without hats, and some showed signs of moisture on their bodies. And on top of that they wore unusually bland colors, as if their brains had already been damaged and they couldn't see what they were wearing. I muttered under my breath, "I'm in some kind of goddamn suicide camp!"

My legs started twitching in the escape response. I tried to stay calm as I walked silently back to my table and picked up my backpack. Shouldering it, I went to the café exit. I barely made it outside before the escalating twitching reached an uncontrollable level and I took off like a proverbial lizard out of hell.

The adrenalin surge and the heat from running clouded my reason. I didn't consider what I was doing until it had happened. A coconut tree was directly in my path. Before I could react, I had climbed it.

There I was, twenty yards above the ground, holding on just under the coconut clusters. Visible to practically anyone in the resort. What a time to give in to instinct!

I turned around and shimmied back down, head first. When I was back on terra firma, I stood and wiped my brow with the back of my hand. Around me a few young children stared as they walked by with their parents, but otherwise I was ignored. Good.

Then I realized that none of the people around me were wearing hats. In fact, I had seen very few people at the resort with hats, and no mopeds or even powered carts. This seemed pretty careless, especially with so much heat in the air here.

Shrugging, I picked a path at random — having already lost whatever sense of direction I had previously had — and started walking. I noticed that the buildings in this part of the resort seemed odd. They leaned at crazy angles. As a matter of fact, so did the people now. It was almost as if I was suffering from —

Touching my forehead, my fingertips came away damp. My breathing became shallow and my hearts pounded in my ears: I was overheating.

I looked around desperately. Where were the ice cellars? Where were the emergency cold packs? What was this, a resort built by the criminally insane?

Stumbling about, I looked for soft dirt to bury myself in. The reasoning part of my mind kept saying to just lie down and yell for help. But the escape instinct was strong. It insisted: "You must Must Be the Heat

get away! Keep moving!" Colors faded and shapes merged. Time lost meaning.

Someone stepped in front of me and placed a hand against my chest. I struggled to push forward, but I was too weak. The person said something. The words sounded angry and offended, but my hearing had shifted to the sub-vocal range and I couldn't understand.

My legs chose that moment to give up the fight, and I collapsed.

I ended up lying on the damn Foigel, of course. I was dying and all I could think about was how uncomfortable I was. Why couldn't someone just cool me off

I realized I was shivering. That was a good sign, since it meant that I was still alive. I flicked my eyelids, but water kept getting in them. There was a roaring sound in my ears.

A female voice asked, "Coming around, are you? That's the weirdest case of heat stroke I've ever seen. I was ready to let you take your chances with the local doctors if this didn't work."

There was a creaking noise, and the roaring suddenly stopped. I realized I was lying in a bathtub; the shower head had been drowning me. My soaked clothes acted as lead weights to keep me pinned against the porcelain bathtub. With the water out of my eyes, I could focus on the speaker. I recognized her as the woman I had tried to help in the café. She wore a light blue coverup now and didn't have on sunglasses, but there was no mistaking that face. Or that figure.

"I probably shouldn't have intervened, especially after what you did to me earlier," she said, "but you wandered onto the porch of my cottage and looked so awful. I'm a registered nurse back home. With the hospital strike here on this island the local medical care really stinks, and they lose more people than they save."

I supposed there could be a strike; I didn't follow the news that carefully. But she lost me with her references to an island. There weren't any islands near this resort. She had acted crazy in the café; maybe this was just more of the same.

"Are you on any medication?" she asked. "Is there anyone I should call?"

"No!" I croaked. That sounded more intense than I'd meant and she backed away. "I mean, no thank you," I said softly. "I've just had a really bad day. Overheating isn't any fun at all."

"You talked about overheating when you soaked me in the café, too. You're weird, but if I wanted to meet normal people I'd vacation back home in the States instead of the Caribbean. My name's Nancy." She stuck out a hand.

What a bland name, I thought as I pulled my right arm out from under my legs and shook her hand. I

was puzzled over her reference to *states*, and wondered if she was functioning with a full gullet.

She was waiting, and I suddenly realized she expected my name. Talk about forward! "You can call me Earl," I said finally. She seemed to accept that and let go of my hand. Didn't she know it was a joke? Apparently not; maybe they were socially isolated in the *states*, wherever that was.

I struggled to sit up in the tub, wet clothing resisting my movements. She handed me a towel and said, "After the way you tried to come on to me in the café, I'm surprised I'm even talking to you. But I must admit that was the most unique line I've ever been handed, although I could have done without the ice."

"Sorry," I muttered, carefully wiping the water from my face. I couldn't decide if she was putting me on or if the heat had damaged her brain.

"Are you staying at the resort, too? I haven't seen you around before today." She sat on the counter by the sink, watching me. Her thin, tan legs dangled a few inches above the floor and swung slightly back and forth. She seemed amused by my discomfort.

"No, just passing through." I had a sudden thought. "Is my backpack around here?" *Please say yes. Please, please!* If I'd lost it while wandering around dazed ...

"Y-yes." She seemed startled by the intensity of my question. "It's by the door."

Praise be the Seven! I exhaled a loud sigh of relief.

"Do you need it? You never said if you were on any medication. Is there some in your bag?"

"No, but I'd like to look it over." When she stepped out of the bathroom I dragged myself out of the bathtub, leaned against the counter for a moment, and then straightened up. Fortunately I seemed to have survived the heat without any serious damage.

When she returned a moment later she stopped at the door. I noticed that she stood about a hand less than two yards, almost as tall as I. She handed over my backpack, the Foigel obviously still inside. I used the opportunity to take a good look at her. I hadn't realized before how truly gorgeous she was: the shape of her face, the curves now only hinted at under her coverup, the sparkle in her yellow hair.

"Thank you for saving my life. I mean, if you hadn't cooled me off when you did ..." I stopped. She was giving me that look again. Then she suddenly blushed and looked down.

A drip of water fell from my right eyebrow into my eye. Without thinking, I licked the water away. Well, so much for trying to impress her with my manners. The movement must have caught her eye because she suddenly looked up. I slid my tongue back where it belonged.

She swallowed and paused for a moment, eyes wide as she stared at me. Surprisingly, she didn't seem offended by my behavior at all. Her green eyes

studied my face. Why hadn't I noticed before that she had green eyes? "Look, I don't mean to be forward ..." She trailed off.

"Yes?" I prompted.

"Are you staying nearby? Do you think we could get together sometime, I mean, in a more normal situation?"

I had to laugh at that, and she responded, her voice sounding like the pealing of bells at Summer's End.

She smiled at me, a friendly and open smile. "Your clothes are soaked. Let me dry them for you. You can borrow a robe while I put them out on the porch chairs."

"I don't want to impose on you."

"Please, it's no imposition at all." She handed me a plain cotton robe and closed the door between us.

A potential problem crossed my mind. "Uh, don't take this the wrong way," I called through the door as I undressed, "but did you happen to notice if anybody saw me come in here?"

"Come on, this is the Nineties. No one is going to care."

What does temperature have to do with caring? She kept saying the oddest things; it was so cute. "I mean, did you see anyone around in suits, especially a fat man in an orange and green pinstripe?"

"What a color combination! No, I certainly would have noticed someone dressed like that. Are you looking for him?"

"Just the opposite." I opened the door and handed her my dripping clothes. Emerging from the bathroom for the first time, I noticed the layout of her cottage. A kitchenette was opposite the bathroom. A dining area and sliding glass door to a porch were to the left, a bed was to the right. I took my backpack and went left.

Putting the backpack in one chair, I sat down in another, folding my hands in my lap. There was a newspaper on the table and I glanced at the headline: "Human Rights Advocate Named to Cabinet." Ha! What's going to be next, raccoon rights? How about appointing a Secretary of Beaver Housing? I could swear the world was getting crazier by the day.

Nancy finished draping my clothes over the porch chairs and came back in. She sat down at the table opposite me. "If you're getting hot, I can turn on the air conditioning. Normally, I like it hot; that's why I vacation here."

I gulped. I'd heard of places that use air conditioning. They say such pleasure palaces make the act of sex more prolonged because of slower body reflexes. I'd never been to such a place, of course, but somehow her invitation excited me. She was very attractive, and even her kinkiness appealed to me, although I never would have guessed I'd fall for her type. Even with her handicap, I knew that sex was

possible; she'd just never have the joy of bearing a clutch. My hearts went out to her with that thought.

Still, despite the invitation I tended to be cautious; otherwise I never would have lived through my twenty-one summers, and I hoped to survive the current one as well. "Aren't we going a little fast?" I asked. "I mean, I barely know you. And you don't even know my name."

She looked confused for a moment and then smiled. "You must have been groggy. You already told it to me."

Now it was my turn to be confused. Maybe I had said something earlier, before we shook hands and she told me her name. I blushed; if I had told her my name while lying down ... No wonder she was acting horny! Well, at least she hadn't left me to die because of that breach of etiquette. I smiled shyly at her and placed my hand on the table midway between us.

She giggled again and took my fingers in hers. Her touch was like fire. "I can't believe I'm doing this." She looked me in the eye. "I have to let you know. I need for a man to be verbal with me. I mean, you have to talk to me to get me in the mood. I mean

... Hell, what I want is for you to talk dirty to me. It really turns me on."

"My pleasure. You want me to be explicit?" She nodded. "I find you very attractive and I want to make wild, passionate love to you. We can even have the air conditioning on if you want."

"Come on," she smiled. "You can do better than that." She had a mischievous look on her face. She stood and pulled me up, leading me toward the bed. "Tell me more."

"All right." I licked my lips as she unfastened the belt of my robe. "I want you to insert your uterine impregnator into my scrotum."

"My *what!*?" She stepped back and my loosened robe parted, revealing my birthday suit underneath.

Her hands went to her mouth. "Oh my God! You're a woman!"

"Oh, come on!" I replied, annoyed at the suggestion. "Notice the ventral tube aperture, and the swelling from the gonads. And I don't even have breasts. Haven't you ever seen a naked man before?" I pulled the robe closed and retied it.

Nancy whitened and backed into a corner. She looked terrified. I tried to soothe her. "I'm sorry, I

A Long Time Ago

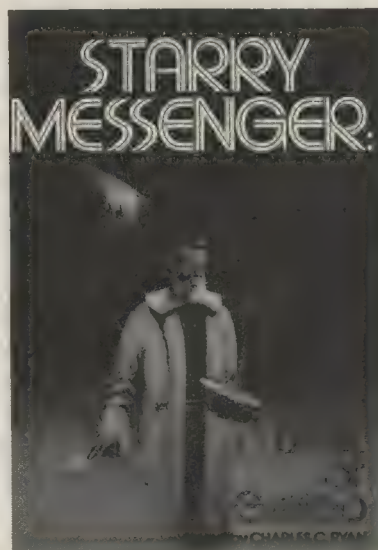
Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for \$10, plus \$2 postage and handling. (Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery.) If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

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should have known you were a virgin. But I thought your clutchmates would have handled your sex education —"

"What are you?" There were tears in her eyes.

"I'm just a man who let his passion cloud his judgment. I never should have let you seduce me. Look, I'll just get my clothes and leave. I don't want to upset you." The throbbing in my groin said otherwise, but I ignored it.

"No; I mean, *what* are you?" She was more emphatic.

"What do you mean, biologically? I'm a male, same species as you. Nothing special."

"What species?"

"Why, *Lacerta sapiens*. What did you expect?"

She mouthed the name silently, then said, "I had Latin in college. *Lacerta* is lizard. *Lacerta sapiens* means Wise Lizard, right?"

"Sure, although marsupial would actually be a more accurate term for us than lizard. It's one of the first things we all learn as hatchlings. Or did you have a broken childhood?" I cringed at my unintentional pun. I also hadn't meant for that to sound nasty, but I didn't enjoy her acting so stupid.

"Open your robe," she commanded, and then added in a hurry, "but stay where you are."

"Make up your mind, lady. My swelling won't last all day." Still, I couldn't say no to her after all she'd done for me.

Turning on a bed-side lamp, she faced it in my direction. She studied my genitals from afar while looking like she was trying hard not to throw up. Then she opened a valise near the bed. "I normally don't carry my bag on vacations, but with the strike here ..." She pulled out a digital thermometer. Beeping it on, she tossed it to me and said, "Put this under your tongue."

I closed my robe again and did as she asked. This was getting weirder by the minute. After a few moments she signalled for it back and gingerly took it from my hand. She glanced at the display for a moment, and then touched the tip with her fingers. "No reading," she said, and tossed the instrument back into her bag. "Your body temperature is lower than ninety degrees Fahrenheit."

"Of course it is," I replied. "I'm not sick; I recover quickly from overheating."

"And you think I'm the same species as you?"

That made me pause. I nodded, starting to feel uneasy about all this.

"What planet do you think this is, anyway?" she asked.

"Well, outside of this resort, it's called—"

Nancy jumped; she was facing the sliding glass door. I turned around and saw a shadow cast into the room. We weren't in the line of sight of the figure outside, but the shadow showed the distinctive outline of a wide-brimmed hat and a large, barrel-

shaped chest.

"It's one of the goons!" I whispered. "He's come for me and the Foigel." My backpack sat on a chair near the door; he'd see it as soon as he walked in.

"Hide behind the bed," she said and pushed me in that direction. "I'll get rid of him."

My legs started twitching again, but I resolved to keep them under control this time.

I lost it when Nancy screamed.

The reflex sent me straight up, and I hit my head on the stucco ceiling, breaking off fragments of plaster. I hate it when that happens.

She came running back while I picked myself up off the floor. "It's a ghost! I can see through him." I brushed off plaster dust and put my arm around her. She was shivering despite her warmth.

"It's just the goon I call Barrel Chest," I explained. "He must be using one of the older Foigels. What we see is only a projected image, but be careful. He's wearing a heater, and it can be deadly even when projected."

"You mean he has a gun?"

"What?! No, a heater's an infrared lamp that can raise your body temperature to a dangerous level. He can't touch us — the old Foigels aren't capable of a physical crossover — but the heater is still effective and he'll try to trick us into overheating. He wants the Foigel in my backpack and he'll kill to get it."

Suddenly she separated herself from me and looked me straight in the face. "The thing in your backpack, what you call a Foigel, can you use it to fight back?"

I put my hand to my forehead and tried to think. This wasn't my field; all I really knew about Foigels was what I'd read in the papers. But I'd also heard they weren't hard to use, maybe I could try something —

Nancy suddenly pulled me back. Barrel Chest had drifted through the glass door and was coming in our direction. He was doing something inside his checkered jacket. I positioned myself in front of Nancy to protect her. Barrel Chest had probably already relayed our location to the other goons and they'd arrive in person shortly. We had to get out fast.

Unfortunately, Barrel Chest had other ideas. My face was suddenly hot and my muscles weak. Drips of sweat blurred my vision. I couldn't run with him using that heater, which was obviously the idea. Nancy saw my distress and reversed our positions to shield me.

"No," I pleaded, "I can't let you do this. Please get away while you can. The others will be coming in person soon." I tried to move her out of the way but was too feeble already.

"You're bothered by this heat? It feels like a pleasant day in the sun to me. I can handle it. Now

think! What can we do? Could we hit him or something?"

"No physical contact," I gasped, sweat trickling down my face. "This is just an electromagnetic image projected by a tensor field. But I've got an idea. Distract him while I get my Foigel."

"OK, move at the count of three." We had backed up into the corner of the bedroom. The transparent image of Barrel Chest hovered in the center of the room, smiling. Nancy counted, "One, two, THREE!" She raised her arms and leapt toward the goon. I saw him flinch while I ran past him toward the dining area.

I'd never operated a Foigel before, but I knew they responded to thoughts. I'd probably have to get close to him, though, and with his heater baking me, it was going to be painful. Pulling the Foigel out of my backpack, I oriented the cube to place the primary Tershian glyphs on top, hoping that was the right thing to do.

Turning, I felt hot and weak as Barrel Chest homed in on me again. I staggered forward and stepped inside his image. Struggling to maintain my concentration, I tried to project the image of an electrical discharge. A *large* one. Then I placed the Foigel against my forehead.

Somewhere, far away, I sensed an explosion.

I lowered the Foigel and looked around; the image of the goon was gone.

"Will he be back?" Nancy asked. She held a long kitchen knife in her hand and looked ready to defend us from any and all threats.

"No, he won't," I replied, easing myself down onto the edge of the bed. "I sensed that I destroyed their Foigel, and the tensor interference should prevent the arrival of any other sendings for a long time. But the rest of them will arrive here in person any minute." Losing control of my heat-exhausted muscles, my body leaned sideways and slid onto the floor. "Get out of here while you can," I gasped. "Leave me; I can't move without going into heat overload."

She dropped the knife and hurried to the bathroom, returning with a wet washcloth. Bathing my face she said quietly, "No, I don't think they'll arrive in person any time soon. But first, you have to tell me: what is a Foigel?"

My temperature was rapidly dropping and I could think again. "It's a special kind of thought realizer," I recited. "It affects monobloc continuum eigenstates ..." She looked glazed. "You could call it a teleporter, I guess, although the one I have with me is the first one fully capable of that specific function. The earlier models could only project the user's image." I was surprised that she didn't know about Foigels already, since the press speculated about them all the time. She asked me why I had the Foigel with me, and I explained about the Must Be the Heat

professor's death and my flight to keep the Foigel out of the murderers' hands.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about," she said. "At least not from them. I saw you touch the Foigel to your head a few minutes ago. Is that how it operates?"

"Yes, the idea is for the user to concentrate and then touch the Foigel to his head. Without concentration the results can be extremely random."

Nancy smiled and looked into my eyes. "And did you happen to touch the Foigel to your head at any time earlier today without concentrating?"

"No ..." I suddenly remembered the bump while descending the stairs on my moped; I sat up and felt the spot with my fingers. It was still sore.

She nodded as if she had suspected as much.

Then she told me where I was. At first I was shocked — imagine, a planet run by mammals — but then I realized that I couldn't possibly be safer from the goons. And I could use the Foigel to get back home. Eventually. If I had thought of it earlier, I could have used it to escape then. Another example of my sluggish thinking today. Must be the heat.

She stood up and went over to the sliding glass door. "No more shadows," she announced. Drawing the curtains she walked back as I climbed to my feet. "We're alone again, Earl. How do you feel?"

"I've almost cooled back down to normal, thank you. And by the way, my name isn't Earl. That's slang for 'man' or 'leatherskin.' A gentleman doesn't tell his name to a lady unless he's been properly introduced."

Nancy had that look in her eye again. "And how does one get introduced?" she asked. I felt my cheeks redden, and I shifted my legs because of the sudden swelling between them. "I thought so. How do you feel about interspecies relationships?" My grin mirrored hers. "Well, intercourse is out," she said as she reached over and flipped a wall switch, turning on the air conditioner, "but we could find out what else is possible." She licked her lips and put her hands on my chest, pushing me down onto the bed.

We found out. □

This is a double issue

Please remember that this is a double issue, with twice as many stories as we normally publish. Because of that it will count as two issues on your subscription, or one if you paid the quarterly rate.

We plan to publish four double issues this year, including this one.

E.R.

By J. Brooke

Art by David Deitrick

The kid came in with half his chest gone. He was in a cryo tank and the stats were lousy: 40 over 0, pupils fixed and dilated. He was a Code 3, a gang shooting: twenty-one years old, a Latino male.

Holstein, one of the emergency room nurses, prepped the kid and rolled his cryo tank into the trauma room. Blood and cryo solution slopped onto the floor: horseshoe-crab cleaning mechs hummed across the tiles of the emergency room to sop it up while the trauma team worked.

The trauma surgeon was already in the E.R. and waiting. Hauk, the Emergency Room physician, plugged the dendrite from the surgical web into an orifice in the back of her skull and studied the kid. Hauk was the rare exception — she actually *liked* the emergency room. That was why she had specialized in emergency medicine. Hauk enjoyed the challenge, despite the ruinous malpractice insurance premiums.

"Looks like a gomer," she commented.

Holstein and another emergency room nurse, Nakamura, did a full-body magnetic resonance scan. They piped the scans to Hauk's console as the image-processing software spat them out.

"Hunter-seeker projectiles." Hauk pointed to the screen. "One blew his chest apart, the other one's still undetonated ... they look organic."

"Correct," the emergency room answered. "These projectiles are intelligent organisms, a product of illicit gene surgery."

"Can you identify the lab that grew them?"

"No," the emergency room answered. "There is no ID number in the undetonated projectile's DNA. It shows signs of sentience."

"Defective," the trauma surgeon commented. "Impact damaged it — it'll blow when it recovers."

"Then let's remove it before it wakes up," Hauk answered. "How much shrapnel in the kid's chest?"

"There are 329 teflon fragments in the patient's torso," the surgical web answered.

"I'll handle the shrapnel," the trauma surgeon said to Hauk. "You take the projectile."

Hauk stared at the magnetic resonance scan that showed bright flecks of teflon grit inside the kid's solar plexus. "Get Outa My Emergency Room, GOMER," she muttered. "Make way for someone we can save"

The trauma surgeon said nothing. He was already plugged into the surgical web, cutting away

to get at the larger fragments. The kid was just USDA choice to him now that he'd entered professional mode; to Hauk, the kid was also meat, albeit a badly butchered variety.

"Let's get him stabilized before we slice that projectile out of him," Hauk said to the ceiling while she swung a pair of hooded sights over her eyes. "Wendell? How about his heart?"

The emergency room answered in a warm, resonant voice: "The patient's heart is damaged beyond repair, Doctor Hauk. Do you concur?"

"Yup. Holstein, give me a heartbeast."

While Hauk talked, the hundred triple-jointed mandibles of the surgical web unfolded and dipped into the two-degree-centigrade fluorocarbon gel that held the kid's shattered body. Nine of the web's chitin claws were already making the incision under the trauma surgeon's guidance: the others dipped and flexed, clamping blood vessels, irrigating the wound, injecting bicarb, epinephrine, adrenaline. The surgical web was in fact a living organism, and its crab-like mandibles worked with cool precision to keep the injured kid alive.

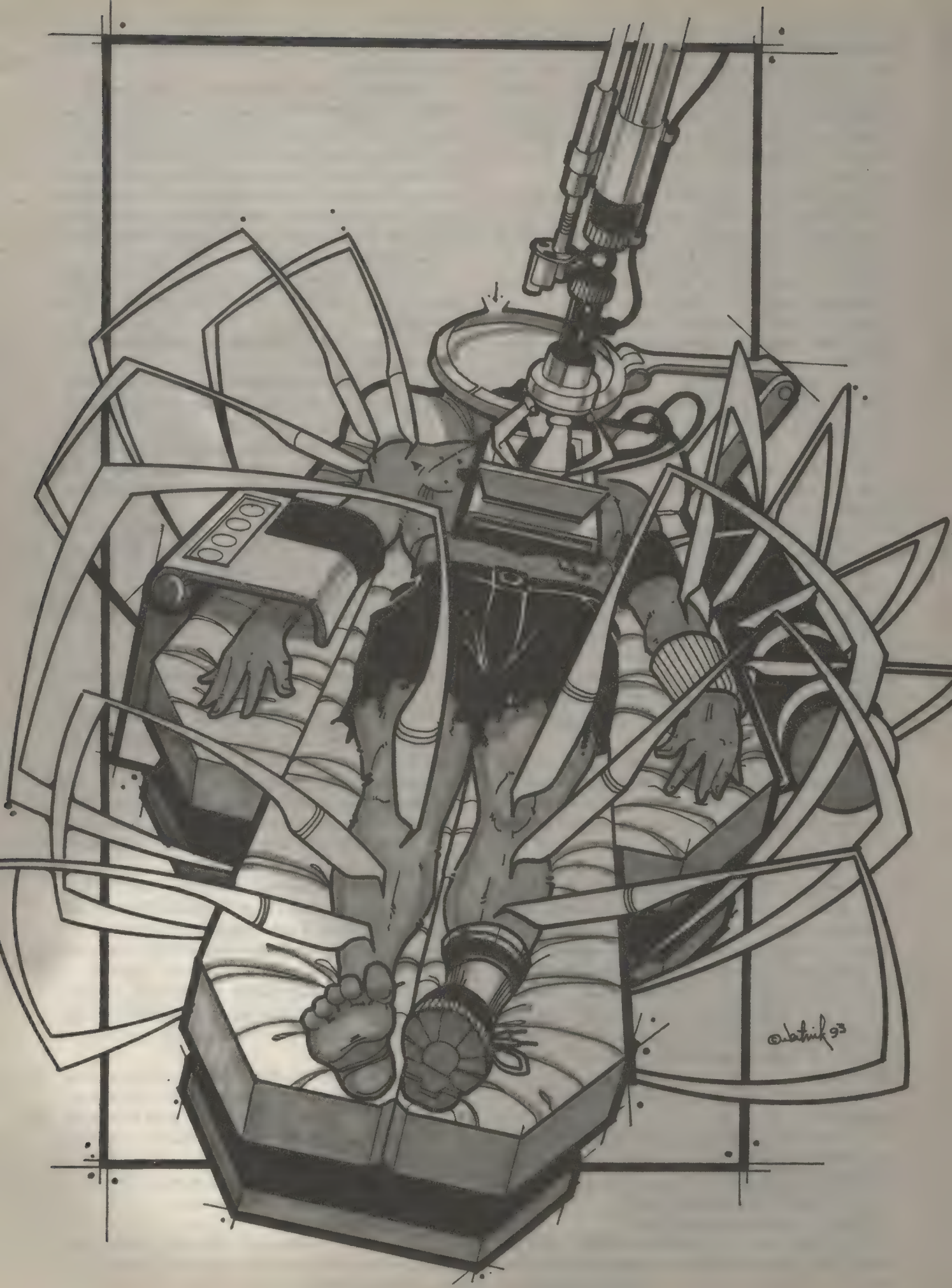
Holstein fished a heartbeast out of one of the growth tanks next to the injured kid.

The heartbeast purred warmly in her gloved hands; ten of the surgical web's mandibles picked the heartbeast up and inserted it into the kid's chest. Once inside the chest cavity, the heartbeast came out of its dormant state and snuggled into place around the original organ. The replacement heart began to feed on the kid's original heart, at the same time taking over all cardiac functions and keeping him alive.

"Toxins in the bloodstream," Hauk said. "Blood urea nitrogen is way up, I'd say his kidney has about had it. Wendell?"

"I agree, Doctor Hauk," said the emergency room. It had been programmed with the personality of the Nineteenth-Century physician Oliver Wendell Holmes, but nobody called the E.R. by that name. They called him Goofy, Buttfuck, or, in polite moments, Wendell.

Holstein handed over a kidneybeast. Hauk's eyes were closed; she could taste the biochemistry of the boy's shattered body directly through the surgical web, and she could feel his organs with palpi a



thousand times more sensitive than her own fingers. The artificial kidney crawled into the kid's body under its own power, ate the old ruptured organ, and turned bright pink with pleasure as it took up its assigned function of keeping the kid alive.

"Stats stink," Holstein said. "BP's down, hematocrit is 10, pulse thready."

The hematocrit was what worried Hauk. It meant the kid was losing blood. A hell of a lot of blood

"How are you doing, Yoshi?" Hauk said to the trauma surgeon without looking up.

"Spine's wrecked. Already got most of the easy fragments, leaving thirty-nine inoperable ones. They look inoperable, anyway, but I'll give 'em a try. Kid's lost four units of blood."

"Let's take a look at the undetonated projectile," Hauk said and turned to Holstein. "Need a SQUID, Nurse."

The Semiconductor Quantum Interference Detector was a small unit on rubber wheels. Holstein, the instrument nurse, maneuvered it over the surgical tank and plugged its interface cable into the external equipment jack. "Online, Doctor."

"Wendell, give me a magnetic resonance workup on the undetonated projectile. Make it close — as close as you can get."

Hauk's console flickered and showed the four-centimeter-long organism in artificial colors. The projectile was a cross between a bullet and a cuttlefish, armored with teflon chitin, and its rudimentary nervous system showed up clearly in green and blue on the NMR scan.

"Serial numbers encoded into the projectile's shell identify it as an illegal clone," the emergency room said in a warm resonant voice. "It appears to be a copy of a biowar organism developed at Fort Detrick."

"More military junk. Damn those gangs!"

"I spec the projectile as a Mark Nine U.S. Army Intelligent Fragmentation Sabot. Note here, Doctor Hauk, and here," the emergency room murmured. Portions of the projectile's nervous system leapt instantly into high relief on the NMR scan. "These organelles detect ambient temperature. The fact that the projectile remains undetonated suggests that its brain may have been programmed to self-destruct if it drops below the victim's core body temperature."

Hauk pulled away from the console. "Meaning a booby trap?"

"I believe so, Doctor Hauk. The projectile is not injured; more probably, it is watching us, waiting to detonate if removed."

Hauk sighed. "Can we poison it?"

"Not without killing the patient."

"All right ... use the SQUID. Interface with the projectile's nervous system, paralyze it while I get

it out of there."

"Interfacing now, Doctor Hauk," the emergency room murmured. "The projectile should remain dormant as long as the SQUID is in close proximity."

Pulse-code-modulated bursts of electrical activity flickered through the projectile's nervous system, forcing its EEG into the rhythms of deep alpha sleep. Hauk started to remove the projectile from the kid's chest, looked up. "Holstein? Nakamura? This thing could go south — better back off."

Holstein yawned. "I'm already ten centimeters away from him," she said. "How much farther should I get?"

"Stats are lousy," Nakamura commented. "Kid needs meds. I'll stay."

"I am still interfaced with the projectile's nervous system, Doctor Hauk. Do you wish me to take over?"

Hauk shook her head, using a dozen of the surgical web's chitin claws to slice away restraining tissue and clamp blood vessels. After a long thirty seconds, two of the claws lifted out the undetonated projectile.

Hauk stared at it. The projectile's carapace was green, scaly, flecked with bright shards. Cilia on the projectile waved idly. Its compound eyes stared at her with malign intelligence.

"Dump that thing in an acid bath," she ordered Holstein. "Kill it."

Holstein smiled and did so.

Hauk wiped her forehead before Nakamura could do it for her. "All done, Yoshi."

The trauma surgeon nodded and looked up. "Finished here. All the operable shrapnel's removed. How are we doing?"

Nakamura, the meds nurse, plugged her neck socket into the auxiliary jack of the surgical web, taking over second station to monitor the kid's meds and vital stats. "He's going flatline," Nakamura announced. "Ventricular fibrillation."

"Code blue," Hauk said. "Everyone clear."

The nurses backed away. The SQUID probe and all the mandibles of the surgical web retracted.

Hauk already had the defibrillator out. She rubbed the round metal electrodes together to spread the anti-burn paste across both surfaces while the trauma surgeon and the anesthesiologist disconnected from the surgical web and backed away.

Then Hauk took the defibrillator and slapped the electrodes against the kid's chest. "Charged," Nakamura said, and Hauk hit him with 300 joules.

The kid heaved up. Chest restraints prevented him from jackknifing all the way out of the cryo tank; antiseptic gel splattered across the floor.

"I'm getting a beat," Holstein said.

"Start compressions."

Nakamura hunched over the kid, rhythmically pumping the damaged chest with both hands.

"Atropine," Hawk ordered.

"Losing heartbeat," Holstein announced.

"300 joules. Clear."

"Charged."

The kid heaved up again.

"Still no beat. Flatline. BP 20 over 0."

"300 joules. Clear," Hawk said.

The kid heaved up. Gel slopped over the edge of the cryo tank. All the readings were flatline.

"One amp intracardiac adrenaline," Hawk said.

"350 joules. Clear."

The kid heaved up again.

Gel slopped onto the floor.

"He's gorked," Holstein said. She watched the flatline EEG, then the EKG. "Getting a beat now. It's irregular."

"Start compressions."

Nakamura kept compressing the kid's chest until her arms ached. Hawk could see weariness in the nurse's eyes. Holstein took over, and the trauma team fell into a rhythm, each nurse trading off when one or the other became too tired to continue the brutal sixty-per-minute chest compressions.

"Losing the beat ..."

"375 joules," Hawk said. "Clear."

The kid heaved up inside the tank with a mechanical convulsion.

"Nine minutes. PET scan shows zero brain metabolism. Classic gork." Holstein's eyes were expressionless.

"Take over," Nakamura said. "My arms are giving out."

Holstein immediately resumed chest compressions.

They kept at it until they lost the heartbeat again. Counting the trauma surgeon, Hawk, both nurses, and an intern, there was now a full team of specialists at work on the kid.

"375 joules," Hawk ordered. "Clear."

The kid heaved up. The harsh light in the trauma room etched a death rictus on his face.

"Going to direct cortical adrenochrome," Hawk said. Inside the tank, fine tubules suckled onto the kid's skull, infiltrating directly into his brain. "Fifty mikes."

The kid heaved up.

"Twenty minutes," Holstein said to no one in particular. "PET scan's solid black."

"Going to one hundred mikes adrenochrome. I'm still hitting his heart with 375 joules, stay clear."

The kid heaved up.

"400 joules."

"Charged."

"Clear."

The kid heaved up.

"Twenty-two minutes," Holstein said. "I'm getting a beat. Someone take over compressions."

Nakamura took Holstein's place over the dying

kid and slammed his chest rhythmically until they lost the heartbeat again.

"400 joules," Hawk ordered, blinking sweat out of her eyes. "Clear."

The kid heaved up.

They worked on the kid for about an hour. Finally, long after it had become mindless routine, Hawk stood back.

"All right, I'm calling it," she said. "Thanks, everyone."

The nurses and the intern hesitated. They had been performing the same suite of actions for so long now that their muscles had acquired the habit and the rhythm of motion. They stared at the dead kid.

"Do you want me to take over and continue code blue, Doctor Hawk?" the emergency room asked. Its voice was warm and resonant.

Hawk unplugged from the surgical web. "No. He was a gomer," she said. *Get out of my emergency room*, she thought. *A gomer from the start*. There were other procedures, but the kid had no insurance to pay for them. "What's the time?"

"2:43 AM, Doctor Hawk."

"Log it as time of death," Hawk rubbed her neck. Her hand came away with a drop of straw-colored cerebrospinal fluid where the long slender dendrite had linked her brain directly with the nervous system of the surgical web.

Holstein and two other nurses disconnected the kid's cryo tank from the web. It took a while.

Hawk watched the procedure. She was bone tired, and it was only two hours into her shift.

Fully retracted, the surgical web's razor-sharp claws looked oddly like the spicules of a Venus flytrap, she realized.

Holstein and three other nurses raised the kid to room temperature and hauled him onto a gurney for the morgue.

Hawk put her hands in her pockets and faced the twin stainless-steel doors of the emergency room entrance.

"Code three," the MICN nurse announced, "air-taxi crash. LifeFlight satellite link's out. They're on the pad now."

Hawk cursed softly.

Two paramedics held open the doors while the LifeFlight crew wheeled in three charred shapes in cryo tanks.

"Crispy critters," one of the paramedics said. "We were heading for County but they're full up. Our telemetry's down, probably hackers fucking with a microwave repeater. Sorry, doctor."

Hawk examined the stats on the burn victims.

Two adults and a child. Well over ninety percent of the child's skin surface was burned: acute shock, dehydration, infection would have killed all three of them if the paramedics hadn't dumped the seared bodies into liquid nitrogen to keep them alive during

the flight to the hospital.

Nakamura and Holstein prepped all three patients and transferred them to surgical tanks.

"Kid's in anaphylactic shock," Hauk said. She stood over the child while its charred body was transferred to the surgical tank, the tank wheeled into the burn unit. It didn't look like a child; it looked more like a large chicken someone had charbroiled with kerosene for a month or two.

"Direct connect," Hauk said. "Get a black box and a floater out here. My responsibility."

Nakamura looked up, startled.

"Now, Nurse."

Nakamura unlocked the steel cabinet that held the black boxes.

Hauk was the E.R. doctor on record, so she plugged the dendrite from the surgical web back into her head. Her hands still had blood on them, she realized. She put the thought aside and supervised the replacement of the parents' epidermis with a shark skin/collagen mix until the burn physician got there.

"Wendell, I'm going for a black box transfer. Do you concur?"

"Yes, Doctor Hauk," answered the emergency room. "The outer layers of the epidermis have clearly been burnt away: shock and infection will kill the child without full transfer," the emergency room concluded.

"Good. I'll need a full record of this for the legal department — are you recording everything?"

"Yes, Doctor Hauk. Recording has begun." The recording was for malpractice insurance, in case the parents decided to sue. Using a black box to bypass the public-key encryption on a patient's neck socket and access his nervous system directly was still a gray area in malpractice litigation.

Nakamura returned with a black box.

"I'll need your fingerprint, Doctor," Nakamura said.

Hauk fingerprinted a portable computer terminal and gave a voiceprint. Then she took the black box and plugged it into the child's neck socket.

"The kid's not going to make it," Hauk said. "I'm bypassing the public key encryption on her neck socket and interfacing directly with her central nervous system ... for the record."

Hauk closed her eyes.

Inside the tank, the child went limp.

"Stats are dropping — she's losing it," Holstein commented. "Ready to transfer."

The floater was a biomass in a nutrient tank. It looked like nothing more than a pink cabbage, but it had a memory capacity equal to that of the human brain. Nakamura wheeled the nutrient tank up next to the child. Hauk connected the thin gray nerve fiber from the floater to the kid's standard neck socket, triple-checking the interfaces.

"Ready, Doctor," Nakamura said.

"Wendell? You're sure you notified the burn physician?"

"Yes, Doctor Hauk. Her beeper indicates she is backed up in the ICU, and will be delayed."

"Good. Transferring the information in the child's nervous system to the floater ... now," Hauk said.

"Stats to zero. The kid's flatline." Nakamura checked the EEG readout on the nutrient tank whose biomass now contained the child's mind. "Floater's EEG now matches the child's. No sign of transfer shock."

"Notify the insurance company, Wendell," Hauk directed. "Tell them to get a force-grown clone shipped from —?"

"Rhode Island," Holstein supplied, scrolling the couple's medical ID down on a screen.

"Whatever. Quick as they can. I don't know how long the floater will hold the kid's mind."

"Not long at this rate," Nakamura announced. "Kid's panicking. Transfer shock. She's just realized she's not in her own body anymore. Prechaotic EEG."

Hauk plugged a nerve fiber into the black box and connected it to the orifice in the back of her own skull.

"Doctor?" Nakamura looked up.

Holstein didn't move.

No one moved.

They were all looking at her.

Connecting directly to a patient's nervous system was classic invasion of privacy, a megabuck law suit ... if the parents chose to push it.

"My responsibility," Hauk said. "I'm doing a direct-connect with the patient. Log it, Nurse."

Hauk closed her eyes.

When she opened them she was in a New England farm house.

There was a Winslow Homer watercolor on the wall: *Weather Beaten*, a view of rocks pounded by surf.

A small sepia-haired child stood in the living room. The child's hand was on the ivory handle of the front door.

"Don't do that," Hauk said.

The child turned.

"Who are you?"

"I'm a doctor. If you open that door, you'll die."

"Why?"

"Because this house isn't real. It's all in your mind. Your mind is in a biomass — a bioengineered substitute for your own brain. None of this is real. You've been hurt very badly. You were in an air taxi crash. You have to stay here for a while, until we can get a clone to transfer your mind into."

"I want to see outside."

"You will. Someday. But not right now, okay?"

"Why?"

"Because I say so. You have to stay inside this house. Will you do that for me?"

"I wanna see outside."

"Please. Listen to me. If you open that door you'll die. Do you understand?"

It was too late. The girl had already opened the door of the farmhouse. Outside the door, a field of windswept wheat rippled under a golden sunset.

The child wandered away through the vast wheat field until she was lost from view.

Hauk stood inside the empty farmhouse.

Then she closed her eyes.

When she opened them again she was back in the emergency room. She unplugged the black box.

"Kid's gone," Nakamura said, studying the readouts on the nutrient tank. "We lost her. Transfer shock."

Hauk handed the black box to the other nurse. "I know. Log this back in, Nurse. We won't be needing it."

Hauk looked down at the two other burn victims in the other surgical tanks. They were still alive, still hanging on somehow.

"The parents are stabilized now," Holstein said.

"Three crispy critters, two survivors," Hauk said. "Law of averages."

"The full recording of the transfer procedure has been reviewed by the hospital's legal computer," the emergency room said. "I have also notified the insurance company. An invasion of privacy suit is judged unlikely, as is a malpractice suit."

Hauk nodded.

She logged the time of the child's death on a portable computer terminal and went through some paperwork on one of the wall consoles. Then she rubbed her eyes and walked into the sleeping room adjoining the E.R. There were two cots against the wall, and a boob cube in the corner bubbling holographic advertisements for asswipe and armpit goo.

She didn't feel like watching anything on the cube.

Hauk sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs. It had a broken spring that had never been fixed. Oddly it gave her a feeling of solidity, of permanence. After a while she went out through the big double doors of the emergency room into the cool night air.

A resident stood under the stars. Behind them, the hospital towered up over them for nearly a thousand stories. Far overhead, air traffic moved under the gold web of the Fullerdome that spanned the city, and beyond the dome the stars shone with a high luster.

"Nice night," the resident said.

The sound of rickshaw and pedicab traffic filtered across the lawns that surrounded the hospital grounds.

E.R.

"Noisy," Hauk answered. She breathed deeply of the cold night air and put her hands in her coverall pockets. Then she went back inside.

Nakamura had the parents out of the surgical web. The burn physician had finally arrived and taken charge. "MICN just told us there's a code three on the way," Nakamura said. "Gang victim. Another shooting."

"Tell MICN I need more information."

"Report sounded garbled. Two of the paramedics are dead."

"Jesus."

"They're flying the code three in by cross-wing. I'll get an update."

"Why not the trauma center? Where's Sloane?"

Hauk got Sloane, the MICN dispatcher, on one of the videoscreens that lined the emergency room wall. "Sloane, what's going on with the code three? Give me an update, stats, a remote to the chopper."

"Remote's out," the woman's image said. "The patient trashed it. Killed one of the paramedics, too — or *something* did"

"*Something?*"

"That's all we have. Cross-wing's overhead right now, on final approach."

Hauk heard a distant shriek of turbines outside the emergency room doors.

She went through the twin stainless steel doors and saw a huge LifeFlight cross-wing hovering just above the landing pad. The craft had already switched from fixed-wing supersonic to rotating-wing helicopter mode, and Holstein and Nakamura and two technicians were at the hatch even before it landed, helping to lever a young girl on a stretcher out of the fuselage.

Hauk and the resident lent a hand.

They wheeled the girl into the E.R. and gunysacked her into a surgical tank. There was a hole in the extreme left side of the girl's chest — a big one, nearly fist-sized.

"I don't see any blood. Why isn't she bleeding to death?" Hauk bent to study the wound.

The girl's eyes snapped open.

The girl began to scream.

Hauk felt cold all over, and her gorge rose at the sound — it was like no sound a human mouth should be able to make.

"One amp of thorazine," Hauk said. "Tape her arms down. Why isn't she out? Why hasn't anyone given her meds?"

"Stats are crazy," Holstein said over the girl's continuing scream. "Patient reads full of meds, and her nervous system's still pegged at the top of the meters."

"BP?"

"Reads normal."

"Impossible. There *has* to be trauma — dammit, someone tape her mouth and restrain her."

Nakamura obliged. The girl was straining with every muscle, but she didn't move — she just lay there in the surgical tank. It reminded Hauk of an experimental chimpanzee she had seen once whose pain centers were being stimulated by wires implanted in its brain.

"Cataplexy," Hauk muttered. "Pupils fixed but not dilated." She straightened. "Where's that NMR workup?"

Holstein and Nakamura transferred the images from the magnetic resonance imaging workup to Hauk's console as the image-processing software spat them out.

Nakamura was pale. "I've seen this before, Doctor. In Tokyo."

"Wendell, get a camera fiber in that wound — two camera fibers."

The claws of the surgical web extended like praying mantis arms, clamping off critical blood vessels and extruding two raster-scan optical fibers into the wound, along with a flexible fiberoptic light source.

"Where the hell's the blood?" Hauk whispered. "There should be blood all over the floor from a wound like that."

On the console screens a picture flickered, stabilized.

A pale crab-like creature grasped the girl's heart with six insectile legs. Tendrils ran from the thing's body into her spinal column and major organs, and deep into the vertebrae that abutted the girl's skull.

"What the *hell* is that?"

"White Angel," Nakamura whispered.

Hauk looked up.

"A cybernetic weapon," Nakamura continued. "The Pink Dragon gang in Tokyo was the first to use it. The White Angel keeps the victim alive. It taps into the victim's nervous system through the spinal cord, stimulates the victim's pain centers. It is an intelligent weapon. It controls the patient's body. It knows we're here."

"Jesus," Holstein murmured. She was staring at the mass of nerve fibers on the NMR scan, nerve fibers that led from the White Angel organism in the girl's chest to her spinal column.

"Is the organism sentient?" Hauk asked. "How sophisticated is it?"

"Very." Nakamura swallowed hard. "I saw a White Angel kill everyone in an E.R. in Tokyo General Medical Arcology."

Holstein and the other resident looked up. Suddenly everyone in the E.R. was very quiet.

In the cryo tank the girl continued to strain motionlessly. Her eyes were wide open. She looked as though she were still trying to scream, even though her mouth was covered by surgical tape.

"Wendell? I show four units of thorazine in her system. Why isn't she a zombie?"

"The organism inside the patient's thoracic cavity

is manufacturing thorazine antagonists, Doctor Hauk."

"What? Explain that."

"Molecules that bind to receptor sites in the patient's brain and block the action of tranquilizing drugs," the emergency room answered.

Hauk plugged the dendrite from the surgical web into her skull.

Nakamura put her hand on Hauk's sleeve. "Doctor —"

"Nurse, either assist me or call a replacement."

Nakamura said nothing. Finally, she nodded.

"Clear the E.R. except for you and me and Holstein," Hauk ordered. "That means everyone. Yoshi, the techs, everybody. I'm opening the girl up."

While Hauk spoke, the dozen razor-sharp osteotome claws of the surgical web extended, flexed, began a chest incision. One of the claws jerked, flailed.

Its ruined tip retracted.

It looked as though it had been burnt by acid.

Inside the fist-sized wound in the girl's chest, the creature called a White Angel shifted position.

Hauk got the uncanny feeling that the organism was aware of her ... *personally*.

"Nakamura, use a retractor. Pin that thing down."

The nurse extended a metal forceps into the wound.

A white metal spine flashed out of the wound and jabbed the nurse's hand. Nakamura dropped the forceps on the floor. She turned around. Her face was white. Her knees gave.

"Can't," Nakamura said. "Breathe —"

She fell to her knees.

Hauk cursed. "Everyone! Stay away from the patient —"

Holstein and an intern hauled the stricken nurse into a surgical tank and put it online.

"Wendell," Hauk said. "Talk to me. What happened?"

"From Nurse Nakamura's vital signs, I diagnose toxic shock," the emergency room murmured. "There is a foreign molecule in Nurse Nakamura's bloodstream. Molecular weight over one hundred thousand. A venom of some kind."

Hauk cursed.

"The organism in the patient's chest manufactured a neurotoxin and injected it into Nurse Nakamura's bloodstream," the emergency room continued calmly. "The neurotoxin appears to inhibit oxidative phosphorylation."

"Can you analyze it? Can you bioengineer an antitoxin?"

"Working," the emergency room said. "Yes, Doctor Hauk."

"Do it," Hauk ordered. "Holstein, feed the antitoxin to Nakamura as soon as it's synthesized."

Then get over here and assist me. It'll take both of us to get this damned White Angel thing out of this girl's chest."

Holstein came around on the other side of the patient, and suddenly the patient heaved up from the surgical tank and slammed Holstein against the wall.

All one hundred of the surgical web's mandibles grabbed the girl. The girl fought wildly. Her mouth worked free of the surgical tape. "Kill me," she screamed, pinned against the wall like an insect.

"Stop it," Hawk said. "We're trying to help you —"

The girl howled, an inhuman sound.

Hawk had to shout to make herself heard. "This surgical web wasn't meant to hold a hundred-pound girl in a hammerlock," she yelled.

The girl's screams shaped themselves into words.

Kill me, the girl howled in a voice that warped and boomed and rose to an impossibly high wild shriek, *kill meeeeeeeee!*

Hawk closed her eyes, feeling the struggles of all one hundred of the surgical web's limbs like a karate *sensei* sizing up an opponent. She concentrated, forcing all one hundred mandibles into exertions far beyond anything their delicate muscles had been designed for. It was more than she could handle, but somehow she *did* handle it.

One of the surgical web's palpi maneuvered into position over the girl's left carotid artery. It stabbed down, injecting her with a massive dose of muscle relaxant.

The girl's eyelids drooped, but her body continued to struggle with superhuman strength.

"Wendell, what's going on? Why isn't she tranked?"

"The organism enclosing the patient's heart appears to be timesharing with her nervous system, Doctor Hawk. It is now controlling the motor centers of the patient's brain."

"Induced psychosis," Hawk said. "Wendell? Could it work?"

"Doctor?"

"We can't poison the White Angel or anesthetize it," Hawk said. "It's manufacturing antagonists for every anesthetic molecule we inject into the patient, so we can't put her under, either. But the White Angel organism also has a brain. If it can interface with the patient, so can you. Can we do it? Interface through the girl's own nervous system and then with it, scramble the White Angel's brain until it goes autistic? Then I'll remove it surgically —"

"Yes, Doctor Hawk. A good idea; I'm working on it now."

"No!" Hawk looked up sharply. "Dedicate a sub-routine. If you link directly with that thing it'll scramble you —"

"This problem requires my full resources, Doctor Hawk. I'm encountering some resistance. The White E.R.

Angel appears to have a sophisticated software defense — sense — sssssss —"

White noise sizzled from the emergency room's overhead speaker.

The noise rose in pitch until it became a frequency-modulated scream and vanished into the ultrasonic.

The girl relaxed.

Hawk used nine of the surgical web's claws to dissect the dormant crab-like organism that Nakamura had called a White Angel. With cold precision Hawk chopped it apart, removed it from the patient's chest, and deposited it piecemeal in a ceramic tray beside the surgical tank.

"Wendell," she said. "Wendell, talk to me."

Hawk unplugged from the surgical web and manually injected the girl with the necessary meds.

"Wendell?"

Two technicians peered into the E.R. They stared at Holstein on the floor and Nakamura in the other surgical tank. A resident came in and frowned.

"Where's the nurse who was poisoned?"

Hawk pointed.

The resident bent over Nakamura, studying her stats on the tank readouts. "Damn emergency room just went offline," he said. "Crashed. They're calling a systems analyst. Damn things never work when you need them"

Hawk stood shakily by as the trauma surgeon hurried in to take over the girl. The girl was stabilized, Yoshi said, after a minute's examination: the trauma team would take it from there.

"Wendell," Hawk said.

There was blood and antiseptic gel on the floor. Horseshoe-crab cleaning mechs scuttled to and fro as she walked out the doors of the emergency room. The cleaning mechs kept the tiled floor spick and span, never tiring.

Not like people, Hawk thought.

"Weird night," said another emergency room M.D. as she joined him under the night sky. "Heard they had some software trouble with the E.R."

Hawk looked up.

Overhead, the geodesic dome that covered the city demarcated the stars with pale gold intersecting triangles that led from one horizon to the other, like ordinates and abscissae on a piece of graph paper. It was comforting to think of the world that way — a set of coordinates on a graph. Something rational.

Hawk went back inside, and the floor of the E.R. was as clean as it had been when her shift had started. □

Migration Patterns

By Robert Reed

Art by Jon Foster

Today's road was built on the crest of a dike — a ribbon of fresh clean pavement pointing north-northwest, straight and perfectly smooth, with barely a meter to spare on either side — and Jared, as always, sat where the view was best, up front and beside the driver. Mom drove after breakfast, like always. Then Father. Then Uncle Pete took his turn, which made everyone else uneasy. Except Jared, of course. His uncle had a reputation for being sloppy at the wheel. Nothing big or serious, and he'd never had an accident ... but sometimes he edged over too far, scaring whoever was paying attention. The screams and curses made it all seem worse than it was. And what's more, Jared sensed that his uncle was more than capable, that his little lapses were somehow intentional. Uncle Pete was the best driver among them; risking disaster was just his way of fighting the boredom.

It was noon, maybe a little earlier, when Pete let the tires slip off the roadway. Just for an instant, really. A weak spray of something not quite like gravel peppered the RV's underside, and Mom said: "Dear?" while coming forward in a rush. Her swollen belly got between the two front seats, and she asked her brother, "Why not let Minnie drive? You must be getting tired now."

"I feel fine," Uncle Pete protested. As if to prove his competence, he had pulled them back into position. The roadway's center was marked with a white line fringed with black, then gold — the same colors you found on an adult Cackle. "Hell with Minnie," he growled, "she drives like an old woman. A blind old woman, at that —!"

"I do not!" screamed Jared's aunt. She and Father and a couple of cousins were playing Uno on the kitchen table. "I'm safe. You're the hazard here. I drive like a dream."

"In a dream, she means." Uncle Pete whispered those words, then chuckled with authority.

Aunt Minnie got to her feet and started forward. She wasn't pregnant, her last baby sleeping in the cubicle across from the bathroom, but she remained a big woman, slow and deliberate, her endlessly shrill voice saying, "I'm a lovely driver. Let me in there."

Uncle Pete was in a mood. He rolled his eyes and didn't move.

So she rapped him on the back of the head — that was something different, thought Jared — and she

told him, "Stop. Stop right now. I'm going to scream and scream and *scream* until you stop."

"Oh fucking Jesus!"

And basically this was how it went every day. Uncle Pete scared them with something small, usually around lunch, and Aunt Minnie acted like a crazy woman, trying to get her turn. Was the RV stopped? Was the parking brake set? She wouldn't think of trading places with her husband unless nothing, absolutely nothing, could go wrong. And then she wouldn't start driving until every mirror was just so. As if she expected someone to come up behind them. And when she did begin, after the delays and the fussing, she'd release the brakes and gently, almost surgically, press down on the gas pedal — that's what the adults called it, the "gas" pedal — and they'd accelerate gradually until they were going maybe fifteen miles an hour slower than Uncle Pete managed. Ten miles slower than either of Jared's parents drove. And if there was a whisper of crosswind, Minnie wouldn't even crack twenty. Not to save her life.

Everything in the world was boring; Jared knew it and expected it.

But driving fast on the liquid smooth road was the closest thing he knew to excitement, and he wished Uncle Pete would drive more. Even all the time. Then they'd be able to do their daily migration in no time, getting to every camp early and stretching their legs more. And so what if they went flying off the road sometime? The Cackles wouldn't let anything too awful happen to them. They probably had invisible nets strung up, stuff like that. Jared felt sure. And besides, he thought, what could possibly be more exciting than flying off a dike? Huh?

There was no guessing what used to be here, what kind of terrain had been remade. The main feature now was the dike, and on the east — on their right — it fell away maybe thirty feet, at a forty-five-degree angle. The dike's other side was flooded almost to the top, only its water wasn't much deeper than a person was tall. Excluding Pygmies and children. In that water grew tasteless plants like grass, only bluish and sometimes dull red; and there swam thick colored fishes like carp. (Jared knew about grass and fishes from old nature books and TV.) The Cackles liked eating fish, and they also hunted the



big fat salamanders and swamp worms. Whatever crawled in the brown water was food for them, and none of it could be eaten by people. Father said so. He said that long ago he and Pete had broiled some Cackle carp, just to taste, and they'd gotten violently sick for their trouble.

Cackles lived in the swamps, sometimes close up to the road. Their homes were big rings built from the same concrete-like stuff that made the pavement and the dike faces, except it looked like tree branches stuck together. Concrete tree branches, and their homes didn't have any roofs. Cackles didn't care if rain and stars drained down on them. Uncle Pete said those were clues, that Cackle enemies must have come from the swamps, not from overhead. But of course they didn't have enemies here. Their homes were because of habit and evolution, not from need. They had all sorts of powers and unseen machines, and the Earth had to seem like one giant paradise from their vantage point.

It was always spring, warm and clear, and the Cackles were common. Every day they passed hundreds of them, maybe thousands, and Mom and Father, Minnie and Pete spent hours arguing if they'd come to watch people or if the swamps were that full of them.

Sometimes they looked like old-fashioned cranes, except Cackles couldn't fly. And their brains were tucked inside their round bodies. And they didn't have a real head, only a fancy arm-like thing with a mouth and big eyes stuck on the end. Cackles were white and black and gold, except for the pure white babies. You never, never saw one of them alone. It was at least a flock of ten, sometimes as many as fifty. Hundreds roosted together in their houses, bodies close enough to touch. Jared had seen them in the moonlight, looking through the sharp gaps. Just how they moved from place to place, nobody knew. Not Father or Pete. Not even any of the people they came across now and then. Maybe Cackles had machines that moved them, or magic. Uncle Pete said it was because they were so smart that they could live this way. Smart enough to hide all the fancy nonsense. Successful enough that they didn't feel like one-upping each other, every Cackle the same as every other one, right down to their voices — bright and complicated cackles, yet something about them simple, too. Pure. Even friendly, said Uncle Pete. If you knew how to listen to them just so

Mom brought up a sandwich and a fizzy sweet drink, saying, "Unless you'd like eating with your sisters. Why don't you sit at the kitchen table for a change? Be social?"

"I want to sit here," said Jared. His sisters made stupid jokes and found stupid things to cry about. "I want to watch, okay?"

Mom said nothing, but she was in a mood. Minnie's baby had cried half the night, and maybe that was part of it. Maybe it was more. Later, when the sisters erupted into tears, Mom went off like a bomb. She didn't care if Harriett had three more grapes than Renee! She told them to behave, behave or else Jared was unable to guess what "or else" meant, except maybe Father would spank both of them. Which would be neat, if it happened. Seeing them get the belt ... yes, sir!

Riding these new roads — it was all Jared knew. He was born before the Cackles arrived, but not by much. That was ten years ago, or maybe a million years. Nobody knew for sure. Uncle Pete said they might have been in suspended animation while the Cackles rebuilt the Earth, leveling the mountains and filling up the oceans, draining off the excess water somewhere — Mars was blue, so maybe that's where — and then building the dikes and swamps that covered everything. No exceptions.

Some of the other people hated the Cackles big-time. Like the Chinese, for instance. Sometimes they shared their campsite with a couple of Chinese families and their bamboo RV, listening to the men bitch and moan in their bad English. They'd tell how it wasn't fair, this invasion of aliens. They missed their villages and old homes, and sometimes in the right light the swamps reminded them of rice growing. Some nights they'd work themselves to where they wanted to fight the Cackles. They didn't care how. Put enough wine inside them, and the Chinese would talk a mean game. Like the Russians with vodka. And the one family of Aussies that Jared remembered from long ago, them not needing any booze to get started.

Uncle Pete, on the other hand, thought differently. He believed that the Cackles had been good news. "You have to appreciate how it was at the end, Jared. We'd screwed up our planet every way possible. There were maybe a dozen different kinds of plague, half of them man-made. There wasn't a breath of ozone up high. The Chinese, despite what you hear, were in the fifth year of a famine. And Brazil and Argentina were lobbing homemade nukes at each other. Just like the Jews and Arabs had done before, God rest their souls."

Jared could only halfway imagine that long-ago Earth. He knew how the forests and oceans had looked, having seen them on their TV's bright little screen. And it wasn't too hard to picture things sick and dead. But three quarters of the species extinct? And the human race down under a billion in number? How could anyone let things get so bad?

"The Cackles saved us," Uncle Pete would claim. But only when it was him and Jared. Some people, maybe most of them, didn't appreciate his thinking. "I bet what it is, I bet there's some kind of organization out there. A planet like Earth gets in trouble, a

vote is taken among the advanced worlds, and some smart, talented race gets to come in and make the best of things. For all we know, the Cackles have stocked Mars with whatever they could save. Maybe there are zoos all across the galaxy, and little rain forests and rice paddies are surviving. And for their trouble the Cackles get the Earth. And we're here because they want to watch us. Or maybe they figure it's our planet, and they can't in all goodness kick us completely off."

Aunt Minnie thought Cackles were ugly, cruel, and possibly stupid. She didn't accept the thought that they were in charge now.

Mom and Father were quiet about their feelings, but their eyes said that they didn't like a lot of what they saw. If any.

"But this isn't a bad life," Uncle Pete would claim. "You don't know anything else, Jared, but I bet you can imagine a lot of worse ways to live. Am I right?"

People, at least the ones they met, lived inside RVs. All kinds of RVs. The families drove north or south, east or west. It depended on the day's road, not on the weather. The seasons never changed. Except mostly they went north and south, the same way birds used to migrate.

Maybe it was the way Cackles thought, something left over from their flying days. Like their roofless houses were.

Or maybe the people were divided up into flyways, kept separate from other groups for scientific reasons. Who knew?

Nobody could guess how many people were left, in total.

Or if the rest had died from illnesses already in their blood.

Uncle Pete had counted some four dozen other RVs driving on nearby roadways, families from all sorts of countries and tribes represented. The Chinese and Russians, Aussies and Chileans — a real genetic salad, he said. A rich mixture. "Which is smart of them, if you think about it. Any time you've got an endangered species, the first thing you've got to do is protect its diversity. That's essential."

The Cackles had built the RVs, using their magic. Jared remembered being very young, when he was the only kid old enough to wander, and their rolling home had seemed enormously long and fun, full of private corners and silence. But then came his little sisters and his cousins. He slept every night with his two male cousins, crammed into the fold-out bed above the front seats. He was always fighting for sheets. They liked ganging up on him, the pricks. And Minnie's new baby was crying more than sleeping lately. Some days he couldn't stop napping while they drove, catching up on his sleep that way.

Uncle Pete was right; he could imagine worse lives. But he could picture having a bigger RV too.

Migration Patterns

Longer and maybe even wider. Wouldn't that be nice? And while they were at it, the Cackles could make them wider roadways too.

The Cackles had done it before. There was a family of Thais they knew, and one morning they woke up and found their RV double-long, bending in the middle like an elbow. Cackles did it, Jared assumed, the same ways they kept the refrigerator filled with fresh meat and vegetables, the faucets gushing endless water, and their cool-as-mist engine never running out of fuel. If they ever got a double-length RV, he thought, then he could have his own bed inside his own little cubicle ... and wouldn't that be lovely? Just about perfect. Almost paradise, really.

Jared finished his sandwich at last, then spotted maybe three dozen Cackles standing knee-deep in the muddy water, big eyes watching from the ends of their neck-like arms. A few youngsters were standing in the front, all white and smaller, and like he did sometimes, Jared waved at them, at those kids, feeling something between them and him. Just for a moment. Just a little bit.

"They've saved us," Uncle Pete would claim. "Out of kindness, out of curiosity. It doesn't matter why."

The RVs were supposed to represent native human habitat, which was strange to consider. Jared glanced back as they passed the Cackles, looking down the length of their rolling home. Native habitat meant vinyl and cool-colored linoleum, porcelain and stainless steel. Not much room, and not very interesting either.

"But it is a zoo, after all," Pete would say. "And it's their zoo, not ours."

For some reason, today it seemed particularly zoo-like.

The argument began late that afternoon, and at first it was nothing too big or unusual. It was between Minnie and Uncle Pete. Pete was going to take his turn driving, and she said, "No, let me. Why don't you stay with the kids, play some more Uno?"

Uncle Pete was behind Mom, ready to go.

Jared saw his face grow angry, but he didn't say anything. He acted as if hadn't heard a word.

"Honey? Darling?"

Then Uncle Pete snapped at her. "No, I'm driving," he said. "We'll never make camp in time, a lead-ass like you driving."

That might be true. There had been days, now and again, when they were still on the road at dusk. All of a sudden the engine shut down, their RV gently rolling to a stop, and all but four wafers of pavement dissolved to nothing. There was just enough under them to keep them from sinking into the water or mud, and of course nobody wanted to step outside on those nights. Stretching your legs was every evening's treat, every campsite big

enough for running and games. And sometimes, Jared thought with anticipation ... sometimes there were other RVs and other kids, which meant fun. At least more often than not.

"I drive well," Minnie stated.

"Slow. You drive like a goddamn slug!"

Which was normal, that talk. But then everything got worse, Mom looking back at Pete while she braked. Maybe she didn't approve of his driving, but Minnie's only got slower as the day got old. In her mood, what with everything, Mom didn't want to be stuck indoors all night, no thank you!

"Why can't I drive?" Minnie asked.

Uncle Pete kept silent, his mouth set and his eyes narrowing.

Minnie turned to Father, saying, "You're in my court, aren't you? Tell my dear husband to skip his turn."

Father squirmed a moment, then asked, "Why don't you, Pete? Just this once. Just to keep the peace, huh?"

And Mom said, "No!"

It sounded like a bomb going off, that one word.

Which made Father pissed. He stood and came forward, telling everyone, "I'm in no mood for a fight." Meaning he was in the mood, and so was everyone else too.

The RV had stopped, Mom ready to give Pete the wheel.

"I can drive fine," said Pete. "Now leave me alone."

Mom said, "Take it, then."

Minnie groaned, "He's a hazard. He's my husband and I can say it. He's going to kill us all!"

"Shut your face," said Pete.

Father said, "Everyone shut up."

"Dumb, dumb, dumb ... *people*," said Pete, sticking "people" in place of a worse word. Then he couldn't control himself anymore. He told them, "I hate you, all of you. I'm sick of being with you ... you assholes! All the fucking time!"

Nobody spoke for a long cold moment.

Then Pete jumped into Mom's empty seat, punching the pedal to the floor, and Minnie did something stupid. She tried to grab one of his arms, pulling it from the steering wheel. That's how angry she was. And Mom grabbed her next, jerking hard, shouting at her, "You leave him alone," and with that she slapped Minnie's fat face one good time.

This is exciting, thought Jared.

"Goddamn!" Father screamed. "Cut that out!"

The RV was wobbling from side to side. The women hollered and started wrestling — it was the strangest, scariest thing Jared had ever seen — and they flung themselves against Pete. It was accidental, but Pete just barely kept them moving straight. Then Father pulled Minnie and Mom back into the kitchen, which didn't help. It was like giving the

fight room to grow. To Jared it sounded as if the three of them were fighting each other, all sorts of awful things being said. Someone remembered someone being lazy; another would talk about rude words; Minnie's kids were the biggest brats, and Jared was strange and too quiet.

All kinds of things boiled out, no stopping them.

And Jared looked outside, seeing a big flock of Cackles staring in as they passed. Like always.

Then Uncle Pete was talking, maybe to Jared but probably to himself.

He said, "Forget that shit about this being a good life. I was blowing smoke, because it's not."

Mom called Minnie a childish bitch.

Minnie called Father gutless. At least *her* crazy husband had guts.

Then Pete was saying, "This is hell," with his voice quiet, but intense. He was staring straight ahead, both hands clenched on the wheel. "A family vacation without end, and they want us to suffer. I don't know why I pretended not to see it before. Because that's what this is. Hell, pure and simple."

Cackles had never spoken to people. At least not to anyone Jared had ever met.

But sometimes, mostly around dusk, they'd walk up close to the road and the round spongy-soft campsite, more interested than usual. Like tonight. It looked as if there were a hundred of them west of the dike, and they were talking to themselves, voices steady and almost loud, mixing together into a tangle.

Another RV shared the campsite. It was the Sudanese in their extra-tall model. Where Jared's RV seemed to be made from aluminum on the outside, theirs was mahogany trimmed with ivory. It was a prettier home, though it always smelled of strange meats and sloppy fires. Usually the tall, willowy black kids would play soccer, but not tonight. Tonight both groups kept to themselves, the Sudanese knowing there was trouble and guessing it was best to keep their distance. Or at least it was the safest thing to do.

Jared walked back to the day's road, by himself, hearing the occasional shout from his RV and feeling something like embarrassment mixed with anger, and with shame, too.

When the sun touched the flat horizon, as if on that signal, the fresh-made pavement fell apart with the tiniest of sounds, first to dust and then nothing. In its place, riding on the dike's crest, grew bunches of red grass that looked almost black in the fading light. It was all mud under the grass, he knew. Walking was tough, what with slipping and sinking and the ugly alien smells. *No place to go*, he thought sadly, and he turned back to the Cackles, watching them walking backwards across the swamp, their voices falling away to nothing and nothing louder

than Mom's shouting at Father, her defending Uncle Pete against some charge or other.

One tall old Sudanese man stood beside his RV, peeing off the dike. He looked beautiful and wise and supremely happy, thought Jared. Although why he should look that way, the boy couldn't say.

Then he looked for the Cackles again, but they had disappeared. Which was too bad. Somehow he missed them; which was odd. Very odd.

There were two RVs in the morning, but the Sudanese had gone.

The second RV was identical to theirs, only empty. And what's more, it was set on a road leading straight west from the campsite. Their road kept going north-northwest, but the other one struck out across the open swamp, laid out on mud that had risen in the night. Who knew where it went? Since neither vehicle had a reverse gear on board, there wasn't any choice where to drive. Or there was a choice, but not the one people wanted.

"They want us splitting up, I guess." Uncle Pete stepped out of the new RV, shrugging his shoulders. "That's how it seems."

Nobody spoke. Not even Minnie.

She and Pete would go one way, taking their kids. Everyone sensed it, no need to spell it out.

Yet no one wanted to make the first move.

Finally Pete said, "All right. I'll go by myself." He climbed into the old RV, making all kinds of noise. He was packing clothes, even though the new closets would make him anything he needed. Then he stepped down and squinted at the adults, holding pants and shirts in his outstretched arms, and, after a couple of seconds, he asked, "Isn't this what we wanted? Huh? I thought we all went to bed dreaming something like this would happen."

Minnie hugged herself.

Father stared hard at his own toes.

And Mom, bless her, said, "Maybe we should talk first. About what's best all around."

Pete said, "Maybe we should."

"Okay," said Minnie.

"Good," Father muttered. "Finally."

All day long there was peace, and that night's campsite was extra big, an RV of Mexicans and another of Italians throwing a little party. It was nearly a perfect day. The adults were polite, everyone driving without flaw; no kid dared to cry or fight, at least not in a big way. And the Italians had wine to share, people singing and laughing, bad English mixing with the good.

At one point Pete found Jared sitting against one of the big black tires on their old RV, looking out over the endless swamps. He joined him and asked, "What are you thinking?"

"About what if you'd gone west. I bet that road led

to another flyway, and we'd never see each other again."

Pete smiled, then said, "I bet they knew we wouldn't split up. The second RV ... it was meant as a warning, that's all."

Jared nodded and bit his lip.

"They had to show us what counted. Know what I mean?"

Jared said that he did, yes. What counted, indeed!

And years later, driving his own family over these swamps, Jared would think of that moment and glance at his dark and lovely wife, then their boisterous brown children, and he would feel so glad to have them that he thought he might explode from all the love. And if some child told him, "This is boring. Just driving is stupid. Why can't we do something exciting?" Jared would stop and tie the kid safe and secure on the top of the RV. Then he would drive as fast as he dared. Either they got enough excitement to last a while, or, afterwards — this was better — afterwards the kid would keep quiet, smiling at everything ordinary, treasuring everything about his or her enormous little life. □

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Regatta

By James C. Glass

Art by Alan Gutierrez

For twenty-four years Master Aldul Jabbora had been a builder of skimmers. His father and grandfather had built the delicate vessels of free flight long before his birth, before Vannarden was ready for colonization, the time when terraforming Sherar was only an idea and the houses of Aurelius and Spandare were joining the systems of Phoenix and Cesteria to form the Aurelian Federation. Aurelius II himself had funded construction and placed winning wagers on craft Jabbora had worked on at his father's side.

Seven regatta wins and a Guild presidency had been his until the arrival of Gilbert Pattee. Nine spectacular wins later it was now Pattee who was master of the Sherarian regatta and the emperor's favorite. Aldul counted himself lucky to have even a Spandarian, Baron Deral Montayne, as a sponsor, though the pittance he provided was barely enough for titanyl alloys and carbon-poly laminates of cocoon, midsel, and fan. He counted himself luckier for the two sons who worked at his side.

Montayne had joined him at the little shop in the very shadow of the emperor's palace to look at the new craft. *Dart V* glistened silver in fluorescent light, diaphanous midsel like moth half-wings fanning twenty feet to either side of the one-man cocoon. The stubby fan-sail aft was unchanged from *Dart IV*, but forward were two bat-winged appendages which Aldul emphasized for his portly sponsor. "Poly-carbol sheet, independently controlled, this is the new feature. It'll give us quickness in maintaining altitude during gusts, and save time."

"The question is, will it mean the extra two minutes you need to beat Pattee? He can still fly at lower altitudes in the red stream, and you can't."

"He's fly-by-wire. A single slip too deep and he'll blow apart one of these days."

Montayne chuckled. "Well, we wouldn't want that to happen. Winning isn't everything to me, or I wouldn't be here."

Aldul ignored the insult. "I'm only asking for a trial run."

"Then proceed. I must see Aurelius now. I believe he wants to place a little wager on the race." Montayne's black eyes sparkled from his pudgy face. "Most amusing," he said, and left the shop.

A stocky young man in his twenties left work at a bench and walked over to put a hand on Aldul's

shoulder. "The man is a sow," he said.

"Without him we have nothing, Daniel," said Aldul. He patted his son's hand. "Remember that. Where is your brother?"

"Watching videos of the Motes again. Did you know he finished *Mote I* yesterday?"

Aldul nodded.

"Are you really going to let him fly that thing?"

"Of course," said Aldul. "But he flies with the Zombies. He knows that. Montayne wouldn't even consider sponsoring an experimental design. As long as Philip flies *Dart IV* for us in the trials, I have no objections."

"It's dangerous, Father," said Daniel. "He'll drop like a rock with the lift he has now."

"We live in danger," said Aldul. "It's part of the sport. Now, let's go see your brother."

Their house was attached to the shop. They found Philip in his room, hunched over a table, looking at a video screen filled with the violence of a planet generations from being habitable and now a partially terraformed nightmare of jetstreams and vortices in blues and reds. Sherar, with its atmosphere of methane, nitrogen, and water from a thousand cometary additives brought in by tens of thousands of ships, swirled before them. And life. The Motes, at a distance only specks of yellow in the turbulence, rising and falling to race at dizzying speeds in the colorful jetstreams. Larger than skimmers, the powerful flyers had been planetary natives prior to the start of terraforming operations, and the controversy over destroying their environment still raged in the emperor's palace.

Philip looked up when they entered his room. "Look, Father," he said excitedly. "The little one is in trouble, and the big one comes to save it."

Daniel scowled and sat down on his brother's bed, looking bored. Aldul showed more interest; the original skimmers had been inspired by these strange insect-like creatures that frolicked in the atmosphere of Sherar. But one had become trapped in a vortex of the blue zone, where wind speeds reached a hundred meters per second. An adult the size of two skimmers was approaching a little one that had signaled danger by flaring the red underside of its double tail, waving it like a flag. Dipping its head, the adult dropped deeper into the atmos-



phere to pick up speed, then swooped upwards, slamming hard into the little one to free it of the vortex. Banking left, the pair caught a jetstream and soared away.

"They're beautiful," said Philip, "and we're killing them."

"Perhaps," said Aldul. "I know that Aurelius is under heavy pressure by the environmentalists to stop the terraforming."

"All he wants is another planet to rule," said Philip.

Aldul put a hand on his younger son's shoulder, the son his wife had died giving birth to, the son whose face reminded him so much of her. Ariel. Still a presence in these rooms. "Philip, I need you to fly *Dart IV* in the trials. I can't observe the new model and fly at the same time."

"Why can't I fly *V*?" said Philip.

"Your brother has a little more experience, and that can make a difference. We need the best starting position we can get."

Philip glared at his brother. "My new design should get us into the blue zone. *Dart V* isn't going to do it."

"It isn't intended to. Will you fly *IV* for me?"

"In the trials, yes, as long as I fly my own in the regatta. I'm sick of losing."

"So am I," said Aldul, "and I want to encourage you, but without a sponsor you fly with the Zombies, and those are the rules." Aldul reached across the table and pulled a scale model of something bizarre towards him. "Your skimmer is appropriately named; it even looks like a Mote. All I ask is that you keep this thing in the red zone. I don't want you trying to fly deeper and getting yourself blown apart."

"But it's *designed* to fly in the blue zone!" cried Philip.

"I told you, Father," said Daniel. "It doesn't have enough lift with those stubby midsels."

Aldul saw Philip sneer at his brother, then the hopeful look in his own direction. "Of course it looks like a Mote; it's a computer simulation scaled to a cocoon size I can fit into. How many dead Motes have we retrieved in the last thirty years, Father? Fifty or a hundred, at least. I went to the palace and requested access to all the R-group test data from the environmental office. I got bearing strengths, shear moduli, torsion constants, you name it, of every bone in a Mote's body. The midsels are downswept and small for flying in the blue zone where the lift is greater. They can't fly in the red layer because of the low density, and they can't breathe there. A perfect biological adaptation to the environment, Father, and I've simulated it for my skimmer. In the blue zone I can go twice as fast as anything Pattee can come up with!"

Aldul shook his head. "Not enough lift. You can

go too deep and be blown apart. No sponsor will take a chance on that."

"Hubertus Koberstine will. He lost his flyer and number-two skimmer in a suction spot last year and agreed to take me on as an experiment if I fly well enough to demonstrate potential."

"Never heard of him," said Aldul. "What does he know about skimmers?"

"Kober Shuttle, Father," said Daniel. "He's made most of his money pushing comets for the emperor. But his skimmers have never finished in the money."

"Potential sponsor or not, you pull the nose up and keep it in the red zone this year, and that's final," said Aldul.

"Things will never change around here," said Philip, rising from his chair. "You'll always take the safe, cautious ways, even if it means losing a sponsor. Let me know when you really want to win." He turned off the video, picked up the scale model of *Mote I*, and stalked out of the room. Aldul looked at Daniel, who smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Touchy, isn't he?" said Daniel.

"Impatient is more like it," said Aldul. "I only hope it doesn't get him killed."

There were eight trials, and Aldul drew number four at the height of a Sherarian day, when Cesteria's heat made the red layer a roiling mess. He was joined by Gilbert Pattee to watch the trials on-screen in the observation bay of the emperor's yacht *Toutan*, overlooking the finish line of the fifteen-hundred-kilometer course. Pattee had sailed in trial two, a leisurely, flawless run bringing him in four minutes ahead of everyone else. "I missed you out there," he said to Aldul. "It all becomes rather boring, but I hear you have something new, yes?"

"Something experimental," said Aldul, not looking at the little man.

"I look forward to it," said Pattee, who then turned away to accept the excited congratulations of several richly clothed merchants who had placed wagers on him.

The image on the screen zoomed in on the starting area as the launch ship approached the top of the red zone, eight skimmers packed neatly in a flat drop bay. Two Motes in the blue zone far below swept by the ship as if it were standing still, bringing a smile to Aldul's face. They show us who the amateurs are, he thought.

The signal rocket burst in a blinding flash of light, and colorful skimmers dropped as one into the crimson maelstrom. Daniel was in the first row in the second-seeded *Dart V*, Philip in second position as third seed, since *IV* had shown poorly, barely in the money, in the previous regatta. The pack spread out immediately in a lovely pattern of colorful midsels,

Daniel taking the lead with Philip close behind. The gap between brothers widened, *Dart V* reacting more quickly to the mess of entangled stream lines, the new forlifts keeping it easily at constant altitude while Philip fought hard to do the same. Both were pushing hard, both uncomfortably close to the blue zone, the others at higher altitude and falling rapidly behind. Aldul watched apprehensively as his two sons swooped close to the transition layer where eddies and loops snaked up from the blue. Without knowing it, he was holding his breath. *The trial is won, so pull up! Get out of there!* He watched in disbelief as the boys raced ahead toward a single blue filament whipping the red zone like an enraged worm. He saw them adjust altitude, but too late, the forlifts of *V* grabbing at the filament and following it while *IV* crashed straight through. At that instant the filament snapped like a whip, tearing the fan from *V* and sending it spinning high into the red zone, out of control, while *IV* charged on toward the finish line. "Daniel!" cried Aldul, and there were moans from the others gathered before the screen.

A crippled *Dart V* spun slowly at the upper edge of the red zone until two kindly flyers, themselves already out of qualifying, got their wings under it and floated it slowly to the finish line, where the emergency station was awaiting them. By that time Aldul had caught a shuttle and was on his way after accepting the best Pattee could come up with in the way of condolences. "Too bad," said the little man, looking sincere. "It was an interesting idea."

"Whiplash," said the doctor, "and I don't want him out of bed until I say so. We'll put him on a shuttle tomorrow, and I want him in hospital five days minimum. By then we can be sure about the spine; right now we're optimistic. Once you have him at home, tie him down if you have to, but keep him in bed."

"It's done," said Aldul, smiling at the crotchety doctor attending his son. He stood shoulder to shoulder with Philip at bedside, looking down at Daniel, who was up to his ears in a thick cast. "Fifteen minutes. He needs rest," said the doctor, and he left the room.

Daniel blinked his eyes. "I'm sorry, Father. I still don't understand what happened."

"The forsels hooked you on a filament at the transition layer and scattered you off the blue zone. Too much lift on the midsels," said Philip matter-of-factly. "Lucky they weren't torn off, or you'd be gone."

"I thought you *were* gone," said Aldul, clearing his throat. "It shouldn't have happened. You were both flying too deep. *Both* of you. What were you thinking of?"

"Speed," said Daniel lamely. "Philip's right about that; we haven't been pushing hard enough. We Regatta

have to take risks to beat Pattee."

"Calculated risks, yes, not foolishness. This was a trial, not the regatta. All you needed to do was qualify, and what I saw was a flat-out race between two brothers trying to prove something. I didn't know either of you could be so stupid."

"Father, I —" said Philip, then cringed as his father turned on him in cold fury.

"— And you! Why didn't you help your brother when he was in trouble? You were behind him, saw what happened, didn't even slow down. Don't you care? DON'T YOU CARE?"

Philip's mouth was moving, but no sounds were coming out.

"Easy, Father," said Daniel. "We were in the middle of a race —"

"— YOU WENT RIGHT BY HIM!"

Tears welled up in Philip's eyes. "Sure, why not? Blame me for the whole thing! Blame *me* for Daniel getting himself in trouble, or a skimmer that's no good! Forget about the fact that *Dart IV* is qualified, or that the time I did was only twelve seconds off Pattee's best! Always Daniel! I should have died with Mom!" Philip stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

Aldul stood in stunned silence, breathing hard.

"Sorry, Dad," said Daniel, "but that was really rotten."

The drop bay was bathed in red light, each flyer standing attendant to his or her skimmer. There were eighty of them, in ten rows, Aldul in the second because of *Dart IV*'s fast qualifying time. Philip was behind him in the tenth row, one of eight flyers allowed each year to fly experimental designs without trial, the row which often gave up at least one death. The Zombies, the other flyers called them. The walking dead.

They were ten minutes from launch when Aldul walked up behind his son and touched him on the shoulder. The boy flinched and turned with a jerk, eyes narrowed. He had been talking to a distinguished looking silver-haired man, who looked at Aldul expectantly.

"Philip, about the other day, what I said, well, it was wrong and off the mark. I'm sorry."

The boy's face didn't change expression. "Forget it," he said. "It isn't important now."

The silver-haired man extended a hand. "You must be Philip's father. I'm Hubertus Koberstine. You've taught him well."

They shook hands. "He could teach me some things," said Aldul. "I just don't want to see him hurt or killed." Aldul looked at Philip, but the boy turned his head aside and stepped into his stubby, droopy-midsel'd craft.

"I understand," said Koberstine. "I have a son of my own. Good flying to both of you."

An alarm blared a warning of the approaching launch. "Be careful, Philip," said Aldul, and the boy nodded curtly, then said, "We all do what we have to do."

The walk back to *Dart IV* seemed a thousand meters, and his own sponsor was nowhere to be seen. When Aldul got there, Pattee was strapping on his helmet, raising a fist in salute. "One more time," he said with a solicitous smile. Aldul ignored him, stepped into his cocoon, slid the canopy shut, and pressurized, the hiss of dry air drowning out the pounding in his ears. Ahead of him a monstrous digital display counted off the seconds. He adjusted lap and chest straps, tapped the rudder pedals with both feet, gripped the attitude control wheel tightly with both hands. I am getting too old for this, he thought. I shouldn't be here.

And then the world dropped away beneath him.

The drop-bay doors opened with a snap, and below them was a river of red and blue gas swirling into the bay as the ship touched the red zone and he pushed the wheel, diving right on Pattee's tail. Hit hard left rudder, slipping into a laminar stream at red mid-level. Ahead and below him several Motes raced ahead, tails raised to signal danger, while another rose to the edge of the zone to watch him pass by. As he glanced at the creature, his eye caught rapid movement below it in the blue zone. A skimmer with short, drooping midsels, diving and passing him rapidly, from all the way back in row ten. *Philip! Why don't you listen?* Pattee's skimmer lurched left and dipped ahead of him. *Ah hah, you've seen him too.*

Pattee dove, and Aldul went with him, as Philip took the lead from well into the blue, flying horizontal for the moment but with an exaggerated nose-down attitude, still gaining speed. Two small Motes raced along with Philip, looking him over. *He's entered their world. He even looks like one of them. Now pull up! Get back in the red stream!*

A sharp bump, and Aldul pulled back on the wheel, face flushing. Watching his son, he had kept diving and hit the transition layer, and then he noticed Pattee was above him, still ahead, but barely, Philip moving away from them both. *Right on you, weasel-face.* Aldul dove again. Bump. *Pull back. Maximize velocity, right at the transition zone, and watch for filaments.* One uncoiled before him, and he ruddered right. Another, like something alive, reaching out for him. He dipped a midsel and sailed around it, looked up, Pattee still there, a few meters out but not gaining. I'm having fun, thought Aldul. For the first time in years I'm really having fun. Ahead and below, several Motes were now frolicking around Philip's speeding craft, having accepted him as one of their own. He's still diving, thought Aldul, and he doesn't have to. There's no way we can match his speed up here, so why doesn't he level out?

For over an hour he played tag with Pattee, who ran a straight course at higher altitude while Aldul zigged back and forth around the eddies and filaments at the transition zone. *I may not pass you, but I can show people some real flying and be right on your ass at the end.* He could see Philip far ahead, a silver speck with a halo of yellow Motes still inspecting their new visitor. It was now a race among three skimmers, the pack at least three minutes behind him. Pattee was near, within reach, Philip assured of a win, and yet Aldul felt apprehension. Why the cloud of Motes still so close to Philip deep in the blue zone, and why the steady beats of color flashing from his stubby midsels? Another bump as Aldul ruddered hard to avoid an eddy, a midsel touching the transition layer. He glanced up, saw Pattee right above him.

The speck that was his son grew larger, colors flashing. "Philip!" cried Aldul. The bizarre little craft was now tumbling slowly end over end in a cloud of frantic Motes, the long fan aft now bent upward in an ungainly position. Out of control, an hour from the finish line, Philip was sinking deeper and deeper into the dark unknown currents and vortices below. Aldul's instincts were beyond conscious control. He veered right and pulled back on the wheel, soaring up past Pattee, who gave him an astonished look before forging ahead of him. He gained altitude in the red zone until he'd matched Philip's speed, dropping one midsel and then the other to keep an eye on him. The Motes darted in and out, actually touching the craft as if trying to stabilize it. A midsel hit one, knocking it away, but it came on again.

Front elements of the pack were now passing below, faces of surprised flyers looking up at him, and he gave them a thumbs-up. Below them there was an explosion of red from Philip's skimmer, a flag of material unraveling from the fan as he tumbled over and over. Aldul hovered in red wind, holding his breath as the rest of the pack passed him by.

Something was rising from the deep blue maelstrom below Philip.

A Mote. The biggest one Aldul had ever seen —

— Floating lazily upward as the cloud of smaller animals backed off, clearing a way to Philip's tumbling skimmer. Pinching mandibles stretched forth, grabbing the skimmer, wings bending forward to form a cup, and instantly the craft stopped tumbling. Aldul could see Philip's helmeted face in the cocoon turned to look straight into the face of the Mote. The animal pushed him upward, and they drifted away from Aldul, who compensated by decreasing his altitude. In minutes the animal had moved the skimmer within a few meters of the transition zone, Aldul bouncing along on top of it, unable to penetrate. The Mote hesitated, puzzled. Aldul could see Philip's face now, grim. The boy gave

him a thumbs-up, then motioned him to back off a little. Aldul nodded, ruddered right, backing off a few meters from the zone, and again they were drifting away from him. They were in a quiet place without filaments or eddies, and when the Mote suddenly moved, it was as if it were offering up a gift, pushing it up to the edge of a world beyond which it could not fly, could not help, at risk in being so near. Aldul swooped as Philip's skimmer emerged from the transition zone, dipped a midsel, got it under Philip — and looked straight into the yellow, featureless eyes of the Mote as they slipped away. He did not look back, ruddering hard to lift the other skimmer until help came, two flyers at the back of the pack who had waited for them high in the red zone, coming in on two sides to lend midsel and float the crippled craft to the finish line only twenty minutes away —

— where they were ignored and forgotten.

When they rolled their skimmers into the great assembly bay, it was already filled with regatta craft. Polite applause came from the dozens of wealthy sponsors lining the balconies above, but it was not for Aldul or Philip.

In the center of the bay Pattee's craft was surrounded by the emperor's colorful entourage, Aurelius embracing the little man fondly and holding up his arm in victory. A second group of people descended on them a moment later, grim-faced, shouting questions, and a heated discussion was soon underway.

Aldul sat down wearily on the metal floor, his breathing still quick. Ten feet away, Philip stood by his crippled skimmer, running a hand along the bent fan. Aldul watched his son, feeling his sorrow, his disappointment, angry yet proud at the same time. The boy had flown in the blue zone, streaking away from them like a meteor, until —

"Why, Philip?" asked Aldul softly. "Why did you risk your life like that? If it hadn't been for the Motes you'd be gone —"

"— I told you that I designed it to fly in the blue zone, but you didn't listen to me! Nobody listened to me!" Philip's voice was bitter, his eyes glistening as he stroked the injured skimmer. "With the right materials I would have beaten all of you by fifteen minutes and be where Pattee is right now. I'd be —" His voice cracked, and he turned his back on Aldul, shoulders quivering.

Aldul got up slowly, feeling tired and beaten. He walked over to Philip and put his arms around him. The boy stiffened, then seemed to relax, body shuddering with quiet sobs. Aldul whispered, "You should have won today. Everyone could see that. My heart was pounding when I saw you streaking away from us. Angry, scared, yes, but also thrilled. The first to fly in the blue zone. My own son. I'm proud

Regatta

of you, Philip. You pioneered something today and — and came back alive." He hugged the boy hard.

"Thanks to the Motes," said Philip.

"Yes," said Aldul, "and bless them all."

They disengaged, Philip turning to look at his father. "So where do we go from here?"

Aldul sighed. "I don't know. Montayne will drop his sponsorship for sure, and we have no winnings. You need titanyl or even graphite laminate for that fan, and I don't see how —"

A young man rushed up to them, hand outstretched. "Philip Jabbora? I wonder if I could have a word with you?"

"Who?" said Philip.

"Alex Dieter, from the Environmental Coalition. I'd like your comments about the reactions of the Motes today."

"Not now," said Aldul harshly. "We've had an exhausting day."

"No, father, I want to say something," said Philip.

Aldul sighed as Dieter brightened and aimed a small video camera at them. Philip described his skimmer, how it had been designed, the signal flag he'd deployed, his joy at flying with the Motes as one of them, the sad eyes of the big one that had pushed him to safety.

"Do you think these were the reactions of a dumb beast?" asked Dieter.

"Of course not," said Aldul, the camera swerving toward him. "Any fool can see the little ones somehow communicated the danger to the big Mote, who pushed my son through the transition zone at great risk to its own life. If that isn't sentient, I don't know what is."

"You call them sentient?"

"I'll say it to anyone who wants to listen. Now, please, I have another son in the hospital and he's probably worried about us. We have to leave."

Alex Dieter lowered his camera and smiled. "We'll be in touch," he said.

Aldul grasped Philip's elbow and turned to leave, nearly running into Hubertus Koberstine, who had silently arrived and was rubbing his hand up and down the bent fan structure of *Mote I*. As they brushed by him, Koberstine said, "I'd like to talk to you about the future of this skimmer. Do you have a moment?"

"We're in a hurry right now. Can we talk in a couple of days?"

"Certainly," said Koberstine, "but aren't you going to the awards ceremony?"

"No," said Aldul over his shoulder. "We don't belong there."

Hubertus Koberstine smiled. "Well, maybe next year," he called after them as they hurried to catch a shuttle to the hospital. □

Rest Cure

By Alexander Jablokov
Art by Larry Blamire

The coffee writhed in my cup, thrusting bubbling pseudopods.

"Ai!" I tried to pour it over the edge of our dwelling pad, but it clung stubbornly to the inside of the cup.

"Oh, dear." Cynthia looked up from inside the ruins of the subspace rotor she was investigating. "I meant to warn you. I fixed the coffee machine."

I stuck a spoon into my cup, trying to pry the thing out. It grabbed the spoon and started climbing toward my hand. "Fixed —"

"Try some sugar."

I dropped the spoon on the checkered tablecloth. The coffee lump landed with a dull splat and spat out the spoon. Globules of steam hissed off its surface. It *smelled* like coffee. Good coffee. I'd been looking forward to a cup.

I poured the sugar on the lump. Instantly, it turned into a pool of dark brown coffee, steaming on the tablecloth.

"I just washed that!" Cynthia cried, and jumped to mop it up.

"Sorry." I thought about pouring another cup. Now that I looked at it, the coffee machine *did* look odd. Twisting tubes covered with phosphorescent fungus led up from the water reservoir, which itself contained some odd, lacy fish from God only knew where, their bulbous triple eyes winking independently, aquatic traffic signals. As I watched, another globule worked its way out of a tube and crawled its way down into the coffee pot. "I don't like sugar in my coffee," I said.

"I'll adjust it, I promise. It's just a little energy-ecology imbalance ... nothing to it." She grinned at me, sponge in hand, her dark hair tied up above her head in a fountain, a smudge of luminescent lubricant on her cheek. She looked ridiculously adorable. I kissed her.

"What was wrong with it?"

"It was making the coffee a little weak."

"A little weak."

"I knew you had company coming." Cynthia sat cross-legged in the rotor and resumed winding the superconducting worm casts around the magneto. "Your notorious colleagues. So where are they?"

"Late." I looked at the writhing mass in the coffee pot and smiled. "You're right. They'd love some coffee." I imagined Mercado's hysterical reaction. And Tzin-Tzinatty, our findit, had been mysterious lately, implying some new wrinkle in tech-smuggling. It annoyed me that he wouldn't just come out and tell, so that we could get to work on it. A dose of Cynthia's coffee would smarten him up.

I sat down on the edge of the pad. Our pad was a vast, irregular chunk of ablative shielding left over from a Tondarth re-entry vehicle, dark streaks of atmospheric burning still colorfully marking its surface. It hung on sunsail filaments from the top curve of the

atmospheric booster that protected us from the weather and the TechImport inspectors. The shielding swung gently when we made love, flexing protectively under us. I'd argued with Cynthia when she wanted to salvage it, but had given in, as usual. She's a woman who knows her materials, even if she has odd ideas of how to fix a coffee machine.

The sunsail filaments caught the light from the rents in the curved metal overhead, as did the floating dust produced by the thunking machinery down below. It was a bright, sunny morning outside.

A swelling translucent sphere passed through a beam of light. Then another. They tried to force their way through the holes into the sky above but were too large. They bulged grotesquely, then vanished with faint pops, leaving rubbery skin dangling down from the torn metal. Vaguely, I could hear shouts from below. I lay down on my chest and stuck my head over the edge.

The drop was dizzying. About fifty of us lived in the toppled auxiliary booster, one end smoothly curved in a shockwave-reflector dome, the other, a quarter kilo down, violently ripped in the launch explosion that had rendered the booster useless. Cynthia and I have one of the best spots, well above the warrens at the bottom. A rubbery sphere pressed itself against my face and I almost inhaled it. I pulled it free and let it pop up to its inevitable doom on the torn edges above.

Below me a fat man in a T shirt much too small for his bulging belly hunched over a rectangle of glowing metal the size of a pool table. With intent care, as if he were transplanting flowers, he placed a tiny spot on the center of the catalytic grill. Instantly, it swelled up, turning into a rotating sphere. He swung at it desperately with a butterfly net, but it, like the rest, easily evaded his clumsy attempts to capture it and floated up towards me.

"Damn you, Fungo," a woman's voice said. "At this rate, we'll never get breakfast. And I *gotta* get to work."

"The first couple just season the grill," Fungo said defensively.

"You mean they season the ceiling." I could just see Fungo's wife Louise as she hung in what she called her bone hammock. She'd had bolts installed in her skull, clavicle, spine, hips, and heels, and she suspended herself by monofilaments from the blast-drill housing she and Fungo lived in. From where I was, the monofilaments were invisible, so she seemed to float, face down, about two meters off the ground, a grumpy angel.

Cynthia plopped herself down next to me. "What's going on down there?"

"Fungo's trying to fry hn'ga eggs again," I explained. "He still doesn't have the hang of it."



"Of course not." Cynthia was scornful. "You don't fry hn'ga eggs. You freeze them. Anyone knows that."

"You try and tell Louise to eat her eggs frozen rather than scrambled."

She grinned at me. "All right, I will. This is the new epoch, after all. By the way, I think Mercado's gotten stuck trying to climb in the roof."

She slid down our rope ladder to intervene. I watched her lithe, energetic figure, particularly her round little butt, which wiggled whenever she did anything at all. I never wanted to let her out of my sight. She lay down under Louise to commune with her and said something that made Louise giggle. Then she walked over to the melancholy Fungo and started explaining something to him. He raised some sort of objection, and she waved her arms, eyes gleaming with joy.

She'd obviously given up on the idea of straightening things out simply and convincing them to just goddammit freeze the eggs like normal people. Cynthia always gives up on the simple way instantly and goes for the complex, convoluted solution. I venture into our kitchen only with trepidation and caution, as if strolling into a den of Sirian drillmasters. A dozen alien technologies conceal themselves there, slicing lettuce with focused black-hole gravitrons, opening cans of beans with Denebian mining acid, storing milk in boxes that drip liquid helium and slide frictionlessly around the counter tops.

If I came home to find Cynthia fixing the toaster, I knew she was giving it the IQ of a professor of alien linguistics and the instincts of the Marquis de Sade — it would toast bread with such art! Such delicate exquisite pain! Which is not to say that I didn't appreciate her efforts — it's just that sometimes I wanted to make myself a sandwich without feeling that I needed an advanced degree in Comparative Technologies and a black belt in multispecies kung fu to do it.

Cynthia was setting gear up around Fungo and Louise's grill, her face flushed and excited. The air around her was filled with yellow glittering pinpoints marking streamlines and vortex centers. It was heartbreaking to watch her, because nothing else excited her quite so much, not even me.

"Matthew!" someone called from above. I peered up into the sunlight. It was Mercado, wrestling furiously with a clutch of friendly hn'ga eggs. "Dammit, what is this stuff?"

"Someone else's breakfast," I said. "Want some coffee? You're late." I grabbed a sheaf of annotated Landing City maps off the table. "I have a line on something interesting. There's a Ssarna temple acolyte — you know, one of those birth-traumatized, semi-psychotic, post-reproductive females they use for religious technology development —"

"No time for that," he cried, as he grabbed a cup, dumped coffee and sugar into it, and chugged it down. He didn't notice a thing. "It's TzinTzinatty." Unexpectedly, he chortled. "I guess that's what happens to hypochondriacs."

"What, Merc? What's happened to TzinTzin?" I asked urgently. TzinTzinatty was the best findit in the business. His nose for profitable alien artifacts was almost supernatural. I could work our way through the

maze of Landing City environmental structures and Mercado could cut deals with various alien security services, but it took TzinTzin to pluck out the essential piece of gadgetry that made the difference between profit and disaster.

"Come on." Mercado started climbing back up the sunsail filament. "I have to show you. Just telling you won't make any sense."

"Cynthia?" I yelled as I followed.

"What is it, honey?" Her voice came faintly up from the maze of equipment she'd set up around Fungo's grill. I recognized some Pelbargian fractional-dimension manipulators and a fluid vortex focus. Those damn eggs were going to stay on that grill, or my beloved wife was going to die trying.

"I have to go. Business."

"When will you be back?"

I looked at Mercado, who shrugged. "Don't expect me. This could take a while."

We climbed onto the outer surface of the booster. Mercado's Antarean vehicle, originally intended for military operations on some alien moon, rested on the top, having climbed adhesively up the side. Landing City loomed beyond, its mysterious towers glowing in the sunlight. Mercado jumped into the driver's seat.

"Try to make it for dinner." Cynthia sounded concerned. She thought tech-smuggling was a dangerous line of work.

"I will. I love — holy shit!"

The Mercadomobile was already rolling, ripping down the booster's side. I had been holding on to the door frame and had to sling myself in before he yanked me over the curve and tumbled me to the distant ground, something I was sure he would have watched with goggle-eyed interest. I strapped myself in, hanging from the increasingly angled seat, almost strangling myself on the belts intended to restrain anatomical parts I did not possess. "Dammit, Merc —"

"We gotta go, Matt. This is serious."

We slid down the gray fabric-like road that led to Slitherville, the Mercadomobile making a noise like a thumbnail along an elastic underwear waistband. The Simlese had laid the road, spitting it out of some gadget that resembled a flying nose-hair remover, as part of their incomprehensible place in the agreements that governed alien relations in Landing City and the surrounding human tech-looting communities known collectively as Jackpot.

I sat back and worried about TzinTzin. He was a great findit, the best. He stole things even our alien buddies didn't know were important. They usually didn't even miss them when they disappeared.

For example, a crèche monitor used to quiet first-instar Tan grubs turned out to be dynamite for coordinating construction robots in orbital spaceship yards. Of course, the robots' internal self-ID schemata tended to get scrambled, causing them to perceive the vessel they were constructing as their mother, link up to its power lines, and nurse contentedly until its central power core was drained.

A random-bouncing toy that entertained Canopan brats, keeping them from going gloaming-feral and eating their parents' gene-modified cyborg servants, served as the basis of a near-silent concrete shatterer,

great for getting rid of the abandoned, crumbling urb-complexes that you find everywhere.

Sphinx's Wheels, hydroclimatrons, epidermal tingle-scrubbers — all had come from TzinTzin's clever thefts of alien plumbing fixtures, plant misters, and office cleaning equipment.

We slid into Slitherville, a dismal collection of shacks and sagging tensile domes housing a collection of reptiles and human beings who had found that their bodily parasites and domestic pests were cross-edible and had great, bellowing rat-and-weenie roasts that were the main social events of Jackpot. Weenies were a weird soft-fleshed creature that lived under the scales of giant saurians. Great with mustard, once you've cut the suckers off.

We slowed down. Run over a non-sentient nymph oligosaur — about the size of a chipmunk, though the adults are bigger than booster fuel tanks — and momma would put her tusks through our heads and hang us up as auxiliary egg-storage carcasses.

"Well, all right," Mercado said. "Here we are."

The Mercadomobile drifted to a halt at the main sewer outflow of Slitherville, a dramatic double-arched structure that spit greasy greenish-brown goo. By contract, all the waste from all over Jackpot was mixed and squirted out here. The smell was indescribably bad, the feces of a dozen species.

Looming above was a tangle of rickety gantries supporting flexible parabolic mirrors. The mirrors shifted in the sun, reflecting light down at the sewage, which boiled and steamed in response. Giant saurians relaxed, their bellies in the rotting goo, as intense foci of sunlight scorched across their back plates, exploding desperately fleeing parasites like popcorn. Fangs bared, the saurians thrummed in contentment.

Mercado looked out over the resting thunder lizards, formerly inhabitants of Rigel VII and Spica II, as if mesmerized by their vast mass, the colored spikes on their spines, the wailing, organ-like sounds of their great laboring lungs.

"Where is he, Merc?"

"Eh?" He was suddenly tentative. "Here. He's here. Come on. Wait, wait." He reached behind the seat and pulled out two reflective parasols. "Watch the mirrors. Let's go."

We crossed the sizzling muck, keeping our eyes on the parabolic foci, dextrously flipping our parasols to spill off deadly sunlight. Our shadows fell across the head of a massive cancrossaur, who blinked tiny red eyes in annoyance and rolled a long, needle-covered tongue after us. We skittered away like water bugs, splashing ankle-deep through sewage that I could now see was full of writhing translucent worms. Their crystal-toothed mouthparts rasped on my boots.

We paused at a curving ridge that artistically mixed a stream of gooey yellow-green sewage with a stream that was looser and redder, making a nice swirly effect. Just beyond this excremental pinwheel lay an odd creature indeed. A network of red, coral-like tendrils rose up from the ground two or three feet, supporting what looked like a mass of impossible, multi-colored organs, full of complex ducted vessels, oily secreting tissues, and frantically beating cilia. Rising over it all were dark-purple multilobed air sacs, abandoned bar-

rage balloons inflating and deflating forlornly with the sound of a harmonica filled with a mixture of corn syrup and sewing machine oil. Lidless eyes dangled from long, myelin-sheathed optic nerves like the decoration of an anatomically enthusiastic peacock.

Mercado stopped and stared at the thing, his face gloomy.

"What is it, Merc? What's the problem?"

"That's the problem." He pointed at the interspecies pathology lab display. "That's TzinTzinatty."

"Jesus. What the hell happened to him?" I walked up to the weird agglomeration of incomprehensible body parts, feeling sick, really sick, no longer just nauseated by the sewage smell. I'd worked with TzinTzin for years. I reached out a hand — and pulled it back. God only knew what touching him would do. "TzinTzin? Are you there? Can you hear me?" Mercado and I held our breaths. A saurian shifted with a groan, sending waves of sewage over our ankles, but TzinTzinatty did not respond.

"He went to the doctor with a complaint, some little shit thing, I don't even remember what." Mercado was annoyed. TzinTzin was famous for his minor health complaints. "And something went wrong."

"Looks that way."

"Hey, don't get on my ass," Mercado said aggrievedly. "We have to help him." He averted his eyes from TzinTzin. "He had a bunch of data for Cynthia, some damn thing."

"He loves giving her oddball data," I said. "It's his way of flirting."

"Well, however you want to run your marriage We were talking on the phone about getting over to your place when it happened. He was real excited about this new smuggling idea of his — whatever the hell it is. Then he said he felt funny, like his adrenal medullas were full of centipedes, and I lost contact."

"Poor bastard." I remembered the bony TzinTzin sitting gloomily on our pad, talking to Cynthia. She could actually make him smile, something I'd never succeeded in doing. "All right — first step. What doctor did he go to? Did he say?"

"Yeah. Even wanted to recommend him. I suggest you give him a pass, but that's just my opinion. Health's a pretty individual thing. Lessee ... a [Hic]Kang name of [load-of-gravel-down-corrugated-aluminum/small-animals-thrown-through-turbine-blades], Mercado managed to choke out. "Near as I can get it. Left my vocoder at home. Don't ask me to say it again."

"That's good enough. Where's he hang out his shingle?"

"Out in Bugtown, green zone. A chlorogasper. Never trust those halogen inhalers. Rowdy bunch and you can't even see through the damn air."

"Okay. Let's get him into the car."

"What?" Mercado contemplated the oozing mass of complex tissue in front of us with dismay.

"We can't just leave him here. He's our friend."

"Well ... yeah. Hell of a scene."

"Let's go." So we hoisted the unfortunate TzinTzinatty into the capacious rear of the Mercadomobile. As we tugged at him, organs of no known use came loose and slithered over each other: a nest of

tetrahedral green crystals in a mass of pink fat globules, a multilobed liver-like thing that generated barely visible gas-filled spheres, tensile-structure bladders filled with fluorescent liquids.

"Bugtown," I said.

"You got it."

We entered Bugtown, bumping over raised culverts and open grates spilling toxic gases. I had a nose-breather on in a minute, Mercado the same. Lots of reducing-atmosphere-inhaling types in Bugtown. Methane, halogens, nitric acid, a big mess, and they never maintained their pipes, squirting the dead-ly stuff left and right. Leave a bicycle locked to a meter in Bugtown and in a day it would be gone — not stolen, but dissolved, only the butt-conforming gel saddle left lying on the ground like a cryptic fossil.

I had glanced back at TzinTzin a couple of times to see if he was OK, but had stopped that in a hurry. Some swollen, fuzz-covered version of his spine had emerged from the tangle of organs and now arched over everything, each vertebra rotating independently on its axis with a painful squeaking sound. I could have squirted some of Cynthia's microsphere lubricant into the joints, but feared making him explode or fall into tiny slithery pieces or something. I'm not very good at first aid.

The [Hic]Kang physician's office was on a street of crystal buildings proof against the artificially generated corrosive atmosphere. Puzzling out the holographic advertising glyphs, we finally found the right place.

"Yes, yes, yes?" The [Hic]Kang was a huge, hunched-over creature resembling an insectoidal tyrannosaur with arthritis serious enough that it had pulled its skeleton outside its skin and left it there to facilitate repairs. Each "yes?" involved a puff of chlorine that swirled up to add to the green haze overhead. "What you want? Organ recalibration? Limb stretching? We complete service facility. And price reasonable." He gestured, and obscure surgical machinery moved in the background.

"Are you [clatter/shriek]?" I asked, acknowledging to myself that my command of [Hic]Kang was not the equal of Mercado's.

"Yes, yes, yes! Full license [loud-clatter/yelp-twitter]. Certified interspecies maintenance."

"[Clatter/yelp-twitter] means 'physician' in [Hic]Kang," Mercado advised me, *sotto voce*. "Each physician's specific name is a variation on the main theme, kind of a verbal taxonomic parallelism, you know?" He raised his voice. "Are you denominated [load-of-gravel-down-corrugated-aluminum/small-animals-thrown-through-turbine-blades]?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Chlorine puffed up. "Acquire practice, cheap. Many solar rotations, same location. Welcome!"

"Who the hell are you, then?" Mercado was irritated. "Yes, yes, yes, my ass. What happened to the other guy? We need him."

"Yes, yes, yes. I am [cement-mixer-filled-with-inferior-grade-of-concrete/ferrets-and-weasels-with-their-heads-squeezed-in-vises]. This my business now, inheritance and purchase. Neovascularization, sen-

sory implants, limb multiplication? Yes? Yes, yes?" A hydra-headed multiblade spun up, glittering in the light through the glass roof.

"No, thanks," I said, backing away. "We need some information —"

"Yes, yes, yes, I have none, none at all. Sold, purchased, transacted, gone. You first in file? First for you!" A Vfg readscreen slid up, a black void waiting for input. Mist came off its over-enthusiastically cooled superconducting surface. "See? Yes, yes, yes? Empty, cold, en-vacuumed, in through out."

It took a while. Extracting information from the [Hic]Kang doctor, if that's what he really was, was like sucking cheese through a straw. As it turned out, he had acquired the business from the doctor who had performed the treatment on TzinTzinatty, a doctor with a subtly different name, but then had sold all of the medical records to some third-party data jobber — or at least that was the understanding we managed to get.

"Yes, yes, oh oh oh yes. Physio-industrial mass data distribution. High valuta return. Re-jig and re-skill device complex! Deal good." He thumped his exoskeleton in delight at his own business acumen. "Yes, yes, yes! Cranial enlargement, provisions for advanced infoprocessing?" A chromed half-sphere like a commercial hair dryer lowered itself to a foot over my head. I looked up. It was lined with rasping suckers, countless tiny mouths hungry for my skull. They gaped wide as they came closer.

I dropped to the floor and rolled across the debris-littered floor, coming up in a defensive posture — with my hands firmly over my head.

"Cut it out!" Mercado said sharply. "We're trying to get information. That's rude."

"Sorry." The cranial enlarger slid back up into the green haze overhead. "But how the hell are we going to get any information?"

"Descend! Yes, yes, oh yes. Descend in inversion. Device extraordinary. Inversion in spiritual data."

"You suggest —"

"Yes, yes —"

A brutally loud wailing cut him off. Searing laser flickers glared through the glass building structure. "Don't move a goddam limb or organ!" a stentorian voice bellowed, loud enough that hairline cracks appeared in a skylight. "Slack your fluids, flaccidify your ligaments. Thank you in advance for your cooperation, scum boluses."

"Great," Mercado said bitterly. "Just great."

The subtle and mannered style of Captain Gorf, Head Enforcer of TechImport in these parts, was instantly recognizable.

"Think about it this way," I said consolingly. "When was the last time we ran into Gorf when we were doing absolutely nothing whatsoever illegal?"

Mercado brightened. "We're as slick as a couple of steam-cleaned Tan grubs. This is going to twist his ass, big time."

"Let's not get too foreskin-in-your-face about this," I cautioned. "We have things to —"

Fuchsia-uniformed TechImport squadguys sprinted in, weapons at ready. Their corneas had been buffed and front-silvered, turning their eyeballs into feature-

less gleaming spheres. Impressive in an interrogation, they gave terrible vision in the darkened medico-office. The squadguys tripped and slid like puppies on the garbage-covered floor. One of them wanged his forehead into an overhanging piece of equipment and slammed to the ground, unconscious. The others immediately dropped to the floor and prepared to open fire.

"Calm down, boys. Calm down." Captain Gorf stomped in after his squadguys, immense belly jiggling. It wasn't a real belly, of course, just as Gorf wasn't a real human being, as his bulging, multifaceted eyes indicated. The big stomach still gave him the appearance of a corrupt southern sheriff, one whose mother had consorted with palmetto bugs. He glared at the [Hic]Kang, then spoke with an accent even worse than mine. "Dr. [fart/wheeze], you're in a heap of trouble —" For the first time he saw Mercado and me. He grinned. "Hey, hey. What have we here? This is going to be more fun than I thought. Right, boys?" The squadguys laughed dutifully, except for the unconscious one.

"Hiya, Cap'n, what's up?" Mercado managed to sound annoying and look guilty at the same time. He has a history of bad relations with authority figures. Quite unlike me, of course.

"Well, now, that depends on you, don't it? Why don't you tell me what you're doing here?"

"Getting medical help," I said. "What else would we be doing here?" And if he hadn't come here after us, what had he come for?

"Now, Matthew, boy, why don't you let me ask the questions?" He thrust his swollen face into mine: perfectly human-looking except for the wedge of radio-frequency-sensing spines in the middle of his forehead. And the multifaceted eyes, of course, but that you get used to. His belly shifted under his brightly colored uniform. I didn't so much as glance at it, which would have set him off for sure.

Captain Gorf turned to the [Hic]Kang doctor. "We've had our eyes on you for a while, don't think we haven't."

"Yes, yes, yes. Inoculation of Brakhma's Disease? Dissolves all connective tissue — very relaxing. Very, very. Yes?"

"Bribery's no good, Boneyard. You've been circumventing TechImport restrictions. Smart, real smart. It's a new one on me, that's for sure, using a phony cure to —"

"Yes, yes, yes? Auxiliary sacral infoprocessor? Excellent in ego-suppressed sexual circumstances"

"Listen, keep your inhaler out of my reproductive processes, hear me?" Gorf was really mad now. His belly churned like a couple of cats in a sack going two falls out of three. I should have warned the [Hic]Kang beforehand, but there had been no opportunity. Both Mercado and I backed slowly away. Gorf had been known to shoot microwaves out of that forehead antenna assembly of his, so you kept on his good side unless you wanted your frontal lobes cooked over easy.

The [Hic]Kang blithely ignored Gorf's body language. He rattled his skeletal structure, a sound like a marimba orchestra falling through a plate-glass window. "Yes, yes, yes! Suppress malfunctioning reproductive brain? Calm life? Yes?"

That gave Gorf pause. "Can you really —"

"Don't listen to him, you asshole!" his belly shrieked. Tiny, delicate claws parted his shirt, and a single eye on a stalk poked out. "Can't you see he's just giving you a line?"

Gorf pulled at his shirt, embarrassed. "Shut up, goddammit!"

"You die on this miserable planet and what do I do? Trot over to a multispecies whorehouse? That's a real sensible reproductive strategy."

Gorf was the only Bryrbashi on Earth, though he was an extremely defective example of the species, probably the reason he had been exiled to this backwater. More than most species, the Bryrbashi separated thought and sex, going so far as to turn reproductive functions over to an independent segment of the body, a segment managed by a distinct genital nervous system. Bryrbashi reproduced only after death, when the reproductive segment, quiescent until that point, reached consciousness, moved independently, and took care of business, carrying its genes into another generation.

Except that in Captain Gorf's case, a childhood accident had brought the genital nervous system into consciousness without the usual death and separation. As a result, he had two separate brains: the one in his head, with its mind on higher things like arresting TechImport violators; and the one in his gut, concerned only with surviving long enough to reproduce. It was surprising how much he got done under the circumstances.

"Let's discuss this later" Gorf wrestled with his belly.

"No, it's about time you — look out, for God's sake! Are you trying to get both of us killed?"

Gorf leaped back just as a huge device suitable for picking up suborbital shuttles reached down and scraped the ground where he had been standing, sending sprays of sparks across the floor.

Chaos filled the medico-office as every surgical device in the place came to life and reached for the nearest squadguy, resulting in yelps, shrieks, and one ludicrous high-pitched giggle.

Mercado and I had been expecting something. We ducked, rolled, and scooted out the door fast enough that we could have used re-entry shielding on our foreheads. The Mercadomobile made tracks out of Bugtown.

Jesus!" Mercado leaned on the outside of the comm booth. "This is no time to have a chat with your wife. You're in the wrong line of work, you know that, Matt? You should be knitting cute sweaters for Gorf's genital homunculus."

"Quit dribbling your buttocks, will you, Merc? I'm calling Cynthia for a good reason. Or do you have some fantastically detailed scheme of what we should do next?"

He didn't. I closed the comm booth and let him fume.

The system searched. Cynthia was usually to be found at the end of a long chain of bizarrely structured logical inferences, associative pathways the comm net itself seemed perplexed by.

A whistling sound, and a huge cavern appeared

around me.

"Cynthia? Are you there?"

Clanging metal, pounding hammers. "Matthew? Is that you?" And Cynthia appeared, her hair outlined by the glare of some distant forge. She wore a coverall that hugged her curves. She smiled at me, then looked concerned. "Where are you?"

"Outskirts of Bugtown. I don't have a lot of time. I need some information."

She raised her eyebrows. "Matt, honey. Don't get brisk with me. You run out of the house without an explanation —"

Mercado drummed his fingers on the outside of the comm booth. I kicked back and he stopped.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," I said, because she had a good point. "But I have a real serious problem I have to get through if I'm going to get home." I peered past her at the huge underground space. "By the way, where are you?" Flames rose behind her. The place looked dangerous.

She grinned. "It's that hn'ga egg problem. I think I've just about got it licked."

"Still?"

"It turned out to be bigger than I thought. There are some interesting fractional-dimension consequences"

Leave it to my wife to find fractional-dimension consequences to someone else's lunch. "Can we talk about it later? When we have some more time?" I said, talking over what had become a steady drumbeat from the impatient Mercado. "Do you know anything about inversion modules?"

"Matthew! Tell me you're kidding. You could get into a lot — I mean a *lot* — of trouble."

"I may already be in a lot of trouble. I don't have time. We have a non-communicator with important information and I've been advised that that's the only way to get it out. I need to get it. Soonest, sweets, I'm not kidding. Do you know?"

Something about Cynthia, she can spend all day discussing some little point from every angle — if you *have* all day. When you've got to go so fast you burn Cherenkov lines, she knows it. She put a finger to her lips thoughtfully, then tapped her teeth with her fingernail. "Of course I know. On the east edge of Scumburg there's a waste metal dump. Be careful, hon, lots of radioactive/toxic dust, the housekeeping's a disgrace. It's run by a man named Paratha Amara, one of my basal-equipment suppliers. Nervous man. Paranoid, you might say, but trustworthy. Tell him I sent you and he'll let you take a ride on his surplus Brain Whiz. Is that what you really want to do?"

I sighed. "Yes, dear, I'm afraid it is."

A huge shambling creature covered with clanking chains and other ironmongery rose up out of a hole near Cynthia on some sort of hydraulic lift. Blue flames rose up beneath it, and some of the chain links across its broad back glowed red.

"Done!" it cried, in a disconcertingly tiny voice.

Cynthia turned away from me for a moment. "Good. Could you set it — no, I don't want to hold it, thank you, it's at the melting point of lead — I'm carbon-based, remember?"

"Most sorry!" The huge thing set a new-forged metal

device down on a rock cube, then lumbered off, ripples of superheated air roiling up from its back.

Cynthia bent over, straight-backed, and came back up with a pair of long tongs. She picked up the complex object and examined it. Sheens of light played along its subtly rippled surfaces. She set it back down and looked over her shoulder at me. "Will you tell me about it later?"

"Of course, of course. What is that thing?"

"It's a single-crystal gear box for Fungo's griddle. Well, that's one of the things it is. You know how Mlaumnre dislike single-purpose mechanisms." Mercado started pounding on the comm booth with both fists. Cynthia brought her wide eyebrows together. "And what's *that*?"

"I have to go." I didn't want to. I wanted to find Cynthia and go home, sit on our flexible ablative shield, and never go anywhere else again. And there was something else I'd meant to ask her

She took a deep breath. "Okay. Kiss?"

I kissed the air soulfully.

"No, no." She grinned. "Let's grab some illegal bandwidth, a couple of variable sensory channels. Just a second." She pulled a control sphere out of her coverall and began fiddling with it.

"Cynthia, playing with the network is dangerous. The Loyrdgee frown on —"

"Don't worry so much, sweetie."

"Someone has to."

The image clarified and gained depth, and I began to feel the great extent of the Mlaumnre labor cavern she was in. How the hell had she gotten in there? It was beyond any security I had ever been able to penetrate, deep in the heart of Landing City. I could smell the stink of smelting metal and feel the warm winds from the blazing forges somewhere down below.

Cynthia crooked a finger. I leaned forward. So did she. And, for just a second, I felt the delicate warmth of her lips against mine. "Hurry home," she whispered, and vanished.

Paratha Amara?" We'd been wandering in the huge junkyard for almost an hour, our arms weary from TzinTzin's weight, and had at last found a living being, an ancient brown man covered with thin, fuzzy hair like a newborn.

"Yes?" He looked suspiciously at TzinTzin's blanket-wrapped bulk. "What do you want?"

"We need ... we need to make ... an investigation, you might call it." I was suddenly bashful. "Of a non-compliant subject ... via inversion."

"What the hell —? Get out of my yard. I run an honest operation —"

"I'm sure you do. Cynthia said it would be all right. I'm her husband."

His attitude changed immediately. "Ah, any husband of Cynthia's is a ... how is she? One of my best customers. Very best. Does she need any low-melt slide alloy? A new supply just came in. Quite reasonable."

"She's fine." I was always impressed by how many people my wife knew, and how weird they were. "We're in a bit of a hurry. Can we, ah"

He shrugged. "If you wish. Is that the subject? Bring him this way, please."

Amara strolled around a vast machine and into the mouth of a vast ventilator tube, where he was engulfed by darkness. We followed. Inside, the duct was irregularly lit by giant bugs with bioluminescent abdomens. As we passed each one, it lowered its glowing rear section and looked at us. At first I thought that they were bred to be of service and were graciously lighting our way, then I realized that they were examining us to see if we were worth eating. Each clacked its titanium mouthparts in disgust and disappointment and jerked its bulb-butt back to the roof of the duct.

"Here." Paratha Amara stopped next to a length of grated industrial catwalk supported at either end by a bent and battered metal sawhorse. "Here it is."

"This is the Inversion Module?" I asked. Makeshift cables snaked from the catwalk bench to a complex metal cage, interrupted occasionally by featureless translucent cubes of various colors. The space above was huge and invisible, its size only guessable by the way it absorbed sound. A tiny glowing point infinitely far above might have been a manhole, or perhaps some lazy underground sun.

Amara turned to peer at me, suspicious again. "Are you sure you're Cynthia's husband?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"What's her favorite color, then?"

"What's — Jesus, how the hell should I know?" But even as I said it, I felt a slight chill. I loved her. But, her favorite color? I really had no idea. I hid behind bluster. "And what business is it of yours?"

"Unless you tell me, you can't use the machine. It's mine, and I won't let you use it. Because it's mine. Mine!"

"Cynthia said you would ... damn." I took a guess. "Blue. Teal blue."

"No, it isn't!" He yelled triumphantly. "It's red. Scarlet. You're not her husband, you're an impostor!" He danced in triumph at having trapped me.

"Listen —"

"No, no, I won't — gack!" He choked as Mercado grabbed him by the throat.

"Turn the machine on and get the hell out of here," Merc said through clenched teeth.

"I just wanted to be sure!" the unfortunate Amara squeaked.

"Well, you're sure."

"I am. I am!" Paratha Amara turned on the Inversion Module, checked its levels with every appearance of care, and ran away, back up the ventilation duct toward sunlight. His figure disappeared in the darkness.

I looked in awe at Mercado. "I didn't know you took things that seriously."

He didn't look at me. "I'm sorry I wouldn't let you keep talking to your wife. Let's get to work."

We stepped into the metal cage and turned it on. Then I lay down on the uncomfortably safety-ridged catwalk and slid, unwillingly, into TzinTzinatty's internal universe.

Some of my colleagues have told me that the Inversion Module was invented around Aldebaran as an instructive entertainment device intended for

children. Others maintain that it was designed as something quite different: a torture device for political prisoners who had violated the peculiar Aldebaranian family codes, which forbid direct modes of address between parent and child.

I know the truth of it: it is both. Aldebaranians have excellent reasons for despising and fearing their children, who are savage and merciless sadists until well into reproductive age, when they shed their carapaces and razor claws to become responsible citizens. Torturing his offspring in the guise of instructing them is the only satisfaction an Aldebaranian parent gets.

I found myself walking a windswept mountain ridge, dramatically colored but obviously infertile land opening out to either side. The ridge was razor-sharp and I could balance on it only with difficulty, placing one foot directly in front of the other. Wind howled. Lightning slashed the sky.

After a moment, I realized that the wind was howling words. "No, I do not need an implanted organic magnetic field sensor. Inability to detect field lines is normal to my species. Stop that! My skull plates are fused through normal development."

"TzinTzin!" I called into the wind.

A condor swept out of the clouds and plucked me off with its huge claws. Sky and rock whirled around me. "I'm late to a meeting with my friend Matthew and his wife, Cynthia. Just solve the problem I came here with ... yes, iron is normally present in my blood, thank you. Leave the pancreas alone! It is not a malignant growth." The condor dropped me into its nest, where its offspring, car-crushing trucks with gigantic metal-spiked wheels, roared toward me as the stadium crowd cheered. I floored my miserable Ford Fairlane but knew that I was doomed. "But you may be able to help me with this bio-encryption scheme of mine. It will impress my friends. All we have to do is ... scalp hair is not a symptom of endocrine imbalance. Honest!"

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Literacy begins with you.

I downshifted and swerved left to avoid the bloody trenches of the Western Front. Concertina wire gleamed in the harsh sunlight. Fokker triplanes dove to strafe. I could see the pilots' long silk scarves trailing out behind. "TzinTzin, listen to me! You're in deep yogurt! Your [Hic]Kang doctor's treatment has left you a mess. We've got to get you cured. What happened?"

Serpents slithered out from under the car's hood and began to eat the Sun. Aztec priests pounded drums and gongs to make them go away, but they started in on the Moon and the Pleiades. Little glittering drops fell from the corners of the serpents' mouths as they feasted and became the suburbs of New Jersey, glowing snugly in the newborn night. I parked the Ford and ran into a donut shop in Passaic. Apple fritters exploded into mushroom clouds as I looked for a phone.

"Matthew!" TzinTzin finally recognized my presence. "Where are you? Where am I?"

"You're a mess. You look like somebody's old leftovers."

"Oh, and I suppose you're some kind of Adonis." He sounded hurt. "Just because your wife is beautiful —"

"I'm sorry!" The coffee roaster trundled over and began to French roast my skin. I could feel my essential oils coming to the surface. I licked my lips and tasted hazelnut. "Please, TzinTzin," I screamed into the lolling shiny mouth of the phone receiver. It slobbered and tried to kiss me. "I have to know what happened at the [Hic]Kang doctor's office. Where did his data go?"

A jet of steam, and I slid through the floor into a vast bubbling sea. Giant colonial creatures writhed beneath my feet, entire worlds, entire whirling galaxies contained within their crystal skin. The water became glassy smooth, the smoothness of sick water about to puke. Far off in the distance, farther away than the orbits of the planets, a giant tsunami rose, fragments of cities and mountain ranges swirling in its bulk.

"It was a great plan, Matthew. Brilliant." On the tsunami I could see the tiny figure of a surfer. I recognized the small frame, bony and vulnerable in its pink-flamingo-patterned swim trunks. It was TzinTzinatty in his normal, human form. "It was a piece of Ee-Ee biotech. I encrypted it in my own body. The best piece of smuggling any of us has ever done. A whole new ball game. Right?"

"Right! So how do we get you out of your Epsilon Eridanean code?" Things in the water plucked at my feet.

"That damn [Hic]Kang quack! Just because I had a little medical problem I wanted him to look at ... dimensionally manipulate the unlocking genes. The data is ... Jesus!" The tsunami loomed overhead, forming the dome of the world. TzinTzinatty toppled tiny, flailing off its crest. "... Cynthia ..."

"This is no time to discuss your crush on my wife, TzinTzin!"

"... has the data ..."

The wave crashed over me.

I found myself staring up into the darkness, ridges of the catwalk pressing into my back. Lights flashed somewhere overhead. I blinked at them and tried to figure out where I was.

"It's Gorf!" Mercado yanked me off the Inversion Module. "Let's git!" The police car descended out of the

darkness in a blizzard of anonymous litter.

"Don't pop your pustules, maggot-heads!" Gorf's gooeey, flapjacks-and-imitation-syrup voice boomed out through the tunnels. "Use your slow-twitch fibers and postural muscles and stay real still, so's my motion detectors don't turn you to incoherent plasma."

"Wadawe do, wadawe do?" Mercado was babbling.

"Come on." We grabbed TzinTzin and ran down the ventilator.

"Damn."

Immense ventilator drivers loomed over us, ten meters high. Their wide, flexible turboblades turned lazily, pushing the breeze up the ventilation duct. The turbofans completely filled the passage, and no access ports or maintenance hatches were visible anywhere.

"Great," Mercado said bitterly. "Trapped by Gorf and his Gonad."

"Hey, Matt." The new voice came from somewhere overhead. "Is that really you? How've you been?"

I peered up into the darkness, suspecting some sort of sly trick from Gorf. "Who's that?"

"You really don't remember?" The voice vibrated in a high rhythm. "Cynthia worked on me, maybe a year ago. Powered me up, gave me single-crystal blades, the works."

"Everything still working fine?" I knew Cynthia would want to know. I occasionally ran into one of her gadgets. They were all over.

"Just great!"

Mercado sat down on the ground with his head in his hands. "Now he's chatting with ventilator fans. Jesus, none of this makes any sense at all."

"Shut up, Mercado," I suggested. "Just be polite."

"Oh, sure. Hey Mr. Ventilator, how's your tur been?" He giggled to himself.

"Your friend here's a real comedian," the ventilator said, offended.

"Ah, he's just pissed off because we're about to be arrested and put in prison for the rest of our lives."

I could hear Gorf and the squadguys tramping down the ventilator duct toward us. Glimmerings of their flashlights came around the corner.

"Really, Matt? That's terrible."

"It is."

"Tell you what. Why don't you, just for fun, slide yourselves down into the slots in front of the laminar aligners?"

I looked along the floor and saw a shallow trench, just in front of the rising vanes that controlled the vortex structure of downstream air.

"Mercado. Get down in the trench. Don't argue, just shove TzinTzin in and plop yourself next to him. I'll explain later." I'd explain when I knew what the hell was going on. If I survived that long.

Gorf and the squadguys came around the corner and formed a line across the duct. Their lights blazed at us. We looked like idiots crouched in the trench.

"Put a bucket over your heads so I can't see you!" Gorf bellowed. The squadguys giggled.

"Listen, Gorf," I said. "I can explain —"

"Leave the contents of your little brain right where they are, Matthew. Makes it easier to destructive-read them back at the station. Otherwise the thoughts are just floating around all over the place, and it's a real

mess."

I felt my hair blowing and realized that the breeze over our heads had been stiffening, and was now a fairly substantial wind. Gorf was getting hard to hear.

"So, why don't you vertically stack your bones and ambulate on over here —"

His belly twitched. "I don't like this!" the little voice said. "I don't like it one bit. We should be home in bed."

"Look, little one, this is my job, you know."

The turbofan spun up faster, starting to wail. Gorf's clothes snapped on him like a flag in the breeze.

"Your job? You're going to get us both killed."

"We'll be home — hey, what the hell —?"

The fan started to crank. Most of the squadguys went down to their hands and knees to keep from being blown over. Mercado and I shoved ourselves as far as possible down into the trench, each of us holding on to TzinTzinatty with one hand.

"You moron!" Gorf's belly shouted at him. "This is the last time I let you risk our reproductive future like this. Absolutely the *last!*"

The fan went to maximum. One by one, screaming and grabbing futilely at the floor, the squadguys tumbled away, as if the duct were a vertical hole in the ground and they had just realized it. Gorf stood for one last instant, yelling something we couldn't hear, then his feet left the floor and he vanished around the corner.

The fan blew for one more minute, then stopped. "Climb through the blades," it said. "There's an access hatch on the other side. I'll start up again as soon as you're through."

"Thanks," I said, and kicked Mercado.

"Thanks a lot," he muttered reluctantly.

"Any time. Say hi to Cynthia for me."

"I'll do that."

Let me get this straight." Cynthia sat on a piece of equipment and curled her legs under herself. "Poor TzinTzinatty's been bio-encrypted with Epsilon Eridanean data, but in some screwed-up way." She looked at me. "Matt, I've been telling you this business is dangerous."

"Yes, Cynthia." This was no time to discuss it. The organ pile of TzinTzinatty sat in a corner, drooping fat globules supported by swelling varicose veins dotted with feathery tendrils like the antennae of nocturnal moths. "But the [Hic]Kang doc sold the data that will get him back. And TzinTzin said ... Wait a minute. Mercado, didn't he tell you he was getting some data to Cynthia?"

Mercado looked worried. "Listen, you know I don't mix into other people's marriages ..."

"Cut it out, Mercado. This is important."

"Wait a minute." Cynthia bit her finger thoughtfully, lips wide. Because of the household crisis I'd barely been able to kiss her since we came in. It was driving me crazy. "TzinTzin did put me on to something. Yes!" She yanked a readscreen out of the floor and flicked it on. "I've been collecting data, of course. I get it from all over. I'm trying to develop hypochondriac machinery."

"What?" I was startled. This was stranger even than Cynthia's usual line.

"It sounds silly, but self-diagnostics on complex sys-

tems are so bad. I think we need things that always suspect something of being wrong with them. Most of the time they'll be right. It's a kind of selective paranoia...." She peered at the screen. "Ah, here it is. I collected some obsolete medical records ... some from a [Hic]Kang doctor in Bugtown who was fleeing police prosecution."

"[Load - of - gravel - down - corrugated -aluminum/ small-animals- thrown-through-turbine-blades]?" Mercado asked, and coughed.

"Yes, that's him! Except for the last couple of syllables. He's had some of the strangest patients I've ever heard of."

"Including this one." I pointed to TzinTzinatty.

And there they were, what we had been looking for: his medical records. Cynthia laughed, a delighted, silver sound. "A hangnail? He went to a doctor for that?"

"He takes his health seriously," I said, standing up for my friend.

"Poor guy. Let's get him into the kitchen."

"The kitchen?" Mercado asked.

"That's where she keeps her high technology," I explained. I looked at Cynthia. "Which thing do we use? The subspace garbage compactor?"

"The Heiahahoi beverage fermenter," she said. "It's based on Eridanean gene-twisting technology. It uses quantum perturbations in the magnetic field —"

The more Cynthia explained our kitchen, the more I wanted to send out for pizza. The three of us hauled the protean TzinTzin into the kitchen and shoved him into the fermenter, hauling aside a flask of persimmon wine Cynthia had been experimenting with. I wouldn't miss the stuff, though I had never told her that.

Cynthia then darted around the kitchen, reconnecting various appliances, ducting outputs into unusual locations, and throwing away the eggshells I had left

We goofed. You can vote.

Computers are wonderful things, but sometimes they can lull you into making tiny, but grievous errors.

Last issue we ran a list of the stories eligible for Boomerang Awards — and goofed. We pulled up the list from the disk for the Winter 1991 issue, but got the list for the original Sept.-Oct. issue, instead of the double Winter, or December issue, thus accidentally omitting six short stories and their art.

Those stories are listed below and may still be voted for for the 1991 Boomerang Awards.

"Hotrider" by Keith Brooke; art by Cortney Skinner

"One Star" by Ray Vukceвич; art by Larry Blamire

"Measure for Measure" by Valerie J. Freireich; art by Carol Heyer

"Helmet" by Rick Wilber; art by Larry Blamire

"Due Process" by K.D. Wentworth; art by Lori Deitrick

"Black Earth and Destiny" by Thomas A. Easton; art by Carol Heyer

The deadline for voting is May 15, 1993. Thanks.

on the counter after breakfast. "It'll take a while, you know. These bio-decryption algorithms are used a lot in Ee-Ee data-stuffed cuisine, but there's about a millennium of background —"

"Hey, Cynthia!" a voice shouted from somewhere below our ablative shielding pad.

Cynthia clicked the kitchen processor on and walked to the edge. "What is it, Fungo? Something wrong with the griddle again?"

"Hell no, Cin, it's great. The controls are a little weird but, hey, it does the job, you know?" Fungo wore a perilously high chef's toque. The glowing griddle was now surrounded by a maze of processing equipment, probability foci, and other gear. The Mlaumnre crystal control box had replaced the temperature control at the griddle's end. "It's just that I thought that husband of yours might like to know that the TechImport cops are charging like gangbusters up the booster." Behind me, I heard a muffled exclamation from Mercado. "I think they're here to sling his lucky ass into jail. Lucky for being married to you, I mean. Getting into jail ain't a bit lucky."

"Thank you very much, Fungo," Cynthia said sweetly. "He's a bit of a trouble magnet, my Matt. Could you do me a favor?"

I could hear the squadguys tramping up the length of the booster now, accompanied by the yelps of protesting families as TechImport blithely violated their living spaces. A glance through the rents overhead revealed unnervingly beautiful enforcement ornithopters, their gossamer wings flickering in the red-gold afternoon sunlight. We were good and trapped.

"Sure thing, Cin. You name it."

"Please dump every hn'ga egg you have on the griddle and turn the crystal setting to that thing that looks like a palm tree riding an alligator."

"Gee, I don't know, Cin. Louise is real fond of them hn'ga eggs, and if they ain't here for dinner my ass is going to be slug feed, you know what I mean?"

"Please, Fungo. If this works, we can all go out to dinner."

"Well, hey." He took out an elaborately joined metal box and dumped its contents onto the griddle. "We don't really get out enough, and that's the truth. Lessee ... two centipedes with eagle's wings trying to convince a whelk to come home with them ... open skull with formica counter tops ... pangolin inside of a mercury diffusion pump ... ah, here it is, palm tree on alligator." He pulled the crystal control. "Can I get decent labels on this thing, when you got a chance?" The griddle glowed weirdly, flickering with impossible internal lights.

"It's yours, Fungo."

"This is it, you sinus heads." Gorf's amplified voice vibrated my fillings. "Really it. Release your bladder and sphincter muscles and give yourself a good purge. Captain Gorf is going to suck your marrow."

He swaggered into view and stood looking up at us. The ornithopters flapped loudly above us. We stared down like raccoons trapped in a tree.

"I don't like this, Gorf," his belly said.

"What's not to like?" The squadguys appeared behind him, many of them bruised and bandaged. They seemed remarkably pleased to see me and Mercado.

"These guys might as well be pickled in a glass jar."

"It's quiet," the belly said. "Too quiet."

"Damn it! This is what I get for letting you watch all those old human movies after I'm asleep. Stop kibitzing and think about screwing something."

"I never think about anything else," the belly said bitterly. "Because I know you're going to get yourself killed a hundred light years from the nearest female Bryrbashi genitalia — what did I tell you? Eh? You moron! What did I tell you?"

"Shut up!" Gorf stormed. "Before I — what the hell is that?"

The hn'ga eggs had been bouncing on the eerily glowing grill. They now launched themselves, one by one, and corkscrewed purposefully in the direction of the TechImport troops. For an instant, they did not react. Then a hn'ga egg wrapped itself around one's head. He fell and began to flail around on the ground.

The rest responded promptly and ran away yelping, leaving Gorf alone.

"Hey!" he yelled after them. "Where are you going?"

"Same place I'm going." His belly twitched wildly. "Didn't I tell you that the last time you risked our lives was the *last* time? I did. I know I did." The buttons on Gorf's uniform shirt burst and a tiny creature resembling a hermit crab jumped out waving its eye stalks. "So this is goodbye, you suicidal idiot. I'm hopping the next spaceship to Bryrbash so I can screw something."

"Damn you!" Gorf grabbed at his suddenly detached groin but it jumped out of the way. "You can't do this!"

"Watch me!" The genitals ran off down the booster. "Don't worry, I'll give your worthless genes a good home." Hn'ga eggs swirling around his head, Gorf pursued, holding his suddenly empty shirt closed with one hand.

Louise, Fungo's wife, appeared with a briefcase. She glanced at Gorf as he ran past, then looked up at the circling hn'ga eggs.

"Fungo, ya idjit, that better not be dinner flying around up there."

"Listen honey, I can explain"

The three of us turned away from the growing family quarrel below. It's a tight space we live in. We're used to it.

"Well, now —" Mercado began.

"Hey!" a voice shouted from the kitchen. "It's just a simple hangnail, for crissakes. Leave my cerebellum alone. Hey, where am I?" A worn and tired Tzin-Tzinatty stumbled out, perfectly normal. "Where's the doctor? What are you guys doing here?"

I didn't know how to explain it to him. "Getting ready to go out for dinner. Hungry?"

"Um, yeah, sure." He blinked. "Hey, I'm glad you guys are here. I got a great idea for a smuggling operation, soon as I get this hangnail taken care of"

I sighed. "Forget about it, TzinTzin. Just forget it." I turned to Cynthia. "Say, honey, what's your favorite color?"

"What? Why do you want to know?"

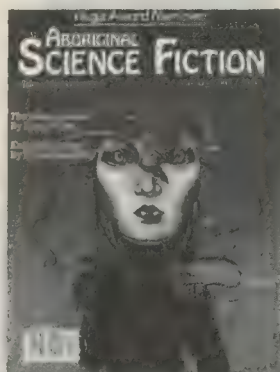
"Because I want to know everything about you."

She blinked at me for a moment. "It's blue, Matt. Teal blue."

I kissed her. "At least something makes sense around here." □

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MYSTERY

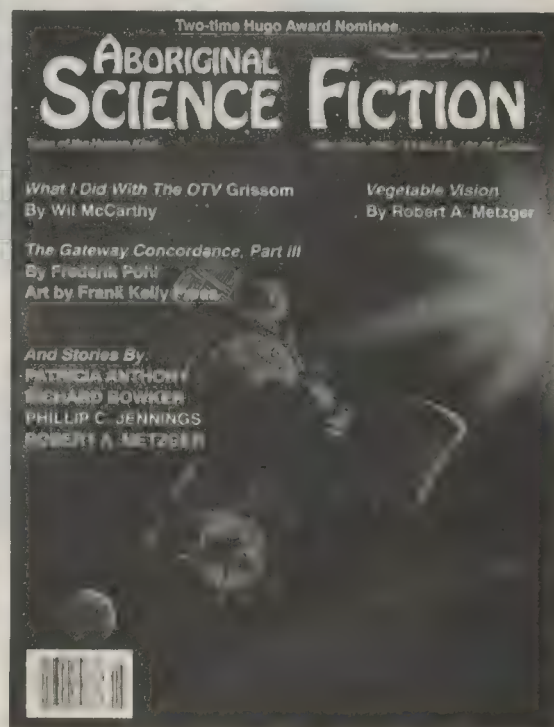


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A Marvelous Time



Hatching the plot for Jurassic Park

Responding to the cockeyed successes of such intellectually challenging films as *Batman*, *Batman Returns*, and at least two of the *Superman* films (all properties owned by Time Warner's DC Comics), Marvel Entertainment is all atremble at the prospect of giving the opposition a box-office rabbit punch with an impressive list of comic-to-screen adaptations. At least the drawing boards are groaning.

You'll remember that previous Marvel Comics properties haven't fared too well. I like that. Restraint. Common courtesy. "Haven't fared too well." *Howard*

the Duck!!! Dr. Strange!!! The Punisher!!! Spider-Man!!! And the maggot-gagging *Captain America* that recently was shunned by the large screen and went lamely, but directly, to the video market without passing go, without collecting two hundred dollars. Now that DC has reaped its gold, Marvel is ready to test the waters again. Muddy; the water looks muddy. But yet they will pan that mud for the little gold dust available.

As mentioned in a previous column, James Cameron is the current Wunderkind slated to write, produce, and direct a high-

budget, live-action *Spider-Man* feature for the financially-hexed Carolco Pictures. This seems to be the only business where terms such as "high-budget" and "financially-hexed" can be linked and everyone's happy. There's fiscal responsibility.

Set to start filming late this year is a live-action version of one of Marvel's longest-running comics, *The Fantastic Four*.

Black vampire hunter "Blade" (now part of the *Nightstalkers* group) is being developed by recording star L.L. Cool J. Other

black characters being considered for the theatrical franchise are *Cage* — writer Kit Carson (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*) has completed a screenplay using this hero-for-hire — and *The Black Panther* for Columbia Pictures. The studio is in discussion with actor Wesley Snipes for the title role.

Also in the pipeline from Columbia is the on-again, off-again *X-Men* live-action film. Industry scuttlebutt is also laying odds on team member Wolverine for his own feature. These movies could be spurred into production if the *X-Men* animated show finds an audience comparable to the animated *Batman* series.

Although there are no definite takers yet, there is multiple-studio interest in a live-action version of *Ghost Rider*.

High-powered directorial interest is behind the development of a film using the character of *Daredevil's* love interest and Ninja warrior, *Elektra Assassin*. The director linked to this project is *JFK's* Oliver Stone. (With the popularity of the darkly-animated *Batman*, Fox is hoping to hit paydirt twice with a *Daredevil* series.)

Wes Craven has the writing and directing job of remaking *Dr. Strange* for Savoy Pictures. *Dr. Strange's* previous incarnation was Peter Hooten in a 1978 TV-movie, directed by *Twilight Zone's* executive producer Philip DeGuere.

An obvious candidate for big screen development is *The Incredible Hulk*, last seen in the guise of Bill Bixby and Lou Ferrigno.

The Phantom (a non-Marvel character) is being developed as both a live-action feature and an animated television series.

Nelvana Entertainment and Galaxy Pictures are turning Mark Shultz's *Cadillacs and Dinosaurs* into a new animated series. Heading the story unit is writer Steven de Souza, whose credits include

Through the Lens

the action films *48 Hours*, *The Running Man*, and the two *Die Hard* films.

Movies

This summer, Walt Disney will release *Hocus Pocus*, starring Bette Midler, Sara Jessica Parker and Kathy Najimy as three 17th-Century witches who are accidentally conjured up on Halloween Night in present-day Salem. Hanged 300 years earlier for practicing their evil sorcery, the trio vowed to reappear and eat all the children of the town. And, in case you're wondering if Disney has changed its family policy, this film is billed as a comedy. Also from Disney and Hollywood Pictures this summer are *Super Mario Bros.* and the re-release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. These films are only two that will have to face the guaranteed competition from Universal's high-ticket *Jurassic Park*, due out in June. (Director Steven Spielberg and cast were trapped on Kauai during hurricane Iniki last year, adding a reported one million dollars to the film's budget.)

In August, the same studio will release *Heart & Soul*, a fantasy-comedy in which four departed souls get one last chance to resolve their earthly lives with the help of a reluctant mortal. The film stars Robert Downey, Jr., Charles Grodin, Alfre Woodard, and Elizabeth Shue. And at Thanksgiving, Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment and Universal will release *We're Back*, an animated feature where dinosaurs journey to modern-day New York. Lending their voices to this film are Walter Cronkite, John Goodman, John Malkovich, Julia Child, Jay Leno, and Martin Short.

Other upcoming animated features include *War of the Worlds* and *The Pagemaster*, with the voices of Macauley Culkin, Leonard Nimoy, Whoopi Goldberg, and Patrick Stewart. (Stewart will also play Daddy Warbucks in a non-musical *Annie*

sequel called *Annie and the Castle of Terror*.)

The Fugitive (based on the '60s series) is now back in production. Plagued by casting problems and delays, *The Fugitive* now has Harrison Ford set to star as the title character, Dr. Richard Kimble. *Honey West* is yet another '60s series to be turned into a feature. Scripting this update is Larry Wilson (*Beetlejuice*).

It seems that Kenneth Branagh is up for the lead and directing honors in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* for Coppola's Zoetrope company. Coppola and Nat Kelly Cole are developing a story called *Sherlock Holmes and Shakespeare*, in which Holmes investigates the credentials of the English dramatist and poet. (No doubt egged on by that well-known rabble-rouser Francis Bacon.)

Writer-director Quentin Tarantino has penned *From Dusk Till Dawn*, which director Robert Kurtzman describes as "*The Getaway* meets *The Wild Bunch* with vampires."

From vampires to werewolves: studio buzz around town is that John Landis is interested in doing a sequel to his *American Werewolf in London* film. Jack Nicholson will star as a New York werewolf in Mike Nichol's *Wolf*. The film is also set to star Michelle Pfeiffer.

Futuristic action films in the pipeline include *Demolition Man*, written by Steven de Souza, in which Sylvester Stallone plays an innocent (naturally) cop convicted of a crime and sentenced to be cryonically frozen instead of serving time in jail. The film co-stars Wesley Snipes.

Action-star Arnold Schwarzenegger and James Cameron (who has a 12-picture deal with 20th Century Fox) will team up again for *The Jackpot*. Schwarzenegger will play a working stiff who moonlights as a double agent. (He will also appear with Dana Carvey and Kevin Nealon in *Hanz and Franz go to Hollywood*.)



The Emerald City (artist's conception by Eric Heschong)

The movie rights to Neal Shusterman's fantasy novel *The Eyes of Kid Midas* were reportedly bought by Peters Entertainment for over half a million dollars. The story revolves around a boy who finds a pair of sunglasses that makes whatever he thinks about happen. The wishes start innocently enough but eventually turn to disaster. (Small change when you consider the one million dollars recently paid for the movie rights to Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*.)

Tim Burton is slated to adapt Valerie Martin's novel *Mary Reilly* (it's the Jekyll and Hyde story as told from the maid's point of view) after completing a picture based on the colorful life of '50s B-movie director, writer, actor, transvestite, ex-Marine Edward D. Wood, Jr.. Wood is best known for such cults as the now infamous *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, *Bride of the Monster* and *Glen or Glenda?*, in which he starred, under a pseudonym.

Films in production: *Forbidden Planet*; *The Stars My Destination*;

Stranger in a Strange Land, based on the Heinlein novel, with Tom Hanks as Valentine Michael Smith; *Superman: The New Movie*; *The Hidden II*; *The Adams Family II*; *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (it doesn't take much to figure out it's a Mel Brooks movie); *The Coneheads*; *Witchcraft V*; *The Fifth Profession*; and *Amityville 6*.

Television

This craze of remaking '50s science fiction films just won't die. HBO Pictures and Fox West Pictures are producing a made-for-cable remake of *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman*, to star Daryl Hannah as a shrew of a housewife who, after encountering aliens, becomes radioactive and starts to grow to a conspicuous height. After its first run on HBO, Fox will telecast the film.

Doorways, created by George R.R. Martin, is scheduled to air this fall as either a 2-hour movie or, if the show is picked up by the ABC network, a 90-minute pilot and series. The show revolves

around a woman from another dimension who is being pursued by bad guys through one-way portals or "doorways." The woman jumps through into our dimension where she eventually meets and is helped by a doctor. When the bad guys arrive, the woman and the doctor are forced to flee through a "doorway" into a parallel dimension and a different world. If the show goes to series, we will see the two people trying to get back home through the "doorways." In preparation for a series, six backup scripts have been commissioned for the different dimensions, including a 20th-century Roman world, a robot world, and a woman's world. As well as creating the show, Martin wrote the teleplay and is co-executive producer, along with James Crocker, who was supervising producer of the second-generation *Twilight Zone* series.

The Sci-Fi Channel has acquired 156 episodes of the original *Twilight Zone* series, hosted by Rod Serling, to be aired in the 1995 season.



We're Back?

In July, the USA Network and the Sci-Fi Channel will kick off a *Star Wars* festival with the first back-to-back television showing of the *Star Wars* trilogy. Also planned is the airing of two animated series, originally produced for ABC, called *The Droids* and *The Ewoks*, along with the behind-the-scenes specials *From Star Wars to Jedi: The Making of a Saga*, *The Special FX: The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi: Classic Creatures*.

As reported in the autumn 1992 issue of *The Baum Bugle*, The Baum Trust, headed by Robert Baum, has finally backed the development of "The Wonderful World of Oz" theme park and resort in Kansas City, Kansas. To be designed by Landmark Entertainment Group, the complex will initially consist of a 50-acre theme park which will encompass the Oz Emerald City, a four-star hotel, a championship golf course set on a large recreational lake, and an Oz museum with one-of-a-kind items donated by the Baum family.

And finally, cheers to Laurel TV for opting not to film Stephen King's *The Stand* in Colorado in

protest of the state's passage of Amendment 2, the measure that voids and prohibits legislation that would protect gays and les-

bians from discrimination and bars the state's courts from considering discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. □

Our Next Issue

The next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* (Fall 1993) will feature the return of regular contributors such as Patricia Anthony, Jamil Nasir, Doug Franklin, Chuck Rothman, John Betancourt, and Graham P. Collins, along with a handful of new faces — and include a visit to Philip José Farmer's *Riverworld*.

"Human Spirit, Beetle Spirit" by John Betancourt takes us on a visit to Farmer's *Riverworld* through the eyes of a South American native. "The Fermi Paradox Explained on a City Street Corner" by Graham P. Collins gives an interesting twist on a classic physics question, with some additional ramifications. "Gingerbread Man" by Patricia Anthony touches upon the real edges of a woman's troubled dreams. Another grabber by *Aboriginal's* premier writer. "If I Should Die Before I Wake" by Doug Franklin lets us in on what really happened to a very famous aviatrix. "Screams are Not Enough" by Chuck Rothman shows that Chuck, the author of "Something on His Mind" (December 1991) and "Natural High" (Spring 1993) doesn't always reach for our funny bone. "A Trace of His Kindness" by Jamil Nasir examines what we really leave behind when we travel into another dimension.

Jaye Carr, a regular contributor to other SF magazines, makes her first appearance in *Aboriginal* with "The Lady or the" an interesting twist on an old tale. "A Word to the New Recruits" by Pete Manison gives some salty advice to all those who don a uniform seeking adventure and glory. A slick customer from the city discovers that he's sold more than he bargained for in "The Salesman" by Michael P. Belfiore. "The Recyclers" by Anthony J. Howard shows where it all may be heading. "Spongehead" by William Shefski delves into the realm of crime in the virtual-reality era. And, space allowing, we will round out the issue with "Slurpglop," a bizarre tale taken from a completely alien point of view by Greg Jones. Space also allowing, we hope to introduce a new feature next issue, providing a peek at some of the neater people and things you might find in a science-fiction convention's dealer's room (the real dealers prefer calling it the huckster's room).

Powerful Imaginations

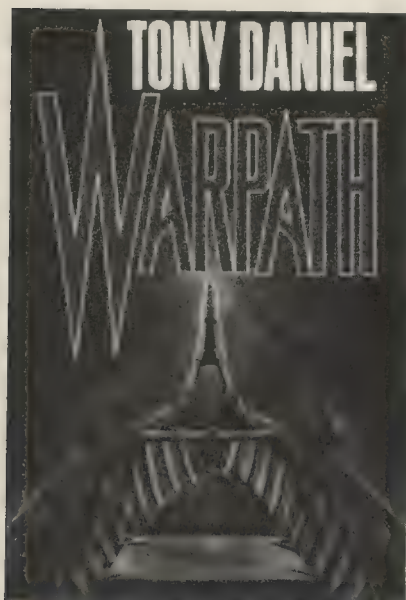
Warpath

By Tony Daniel

Tor, 1993

288 pp., \$18.95

Tony Daniel's first novel, *Warpath*, contains a unique mix of elements — space travel, pre-Columbian American Indians



who sail between the stars in canoes, telekinesis, aliens, AIs — that somehow manages to work. This beautifully written

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

book is rich, exciting, and compelling.

When humans finally invent starships, they arrive at other planets to discover that Indians have been there since about the 1200s, having discovered the mental Effect that allows faster-than-light travel and which is also used, though in cruder form, to run the starships. The new settlers and the Indians exist in an uneasy standoff that is constantly at risk from new discoveries or changes in Earth government. In this novel, we follow Will James, a newspaper editor on a frontier planet, as he fights to avert a war and to save humanity from a horrifying evil.

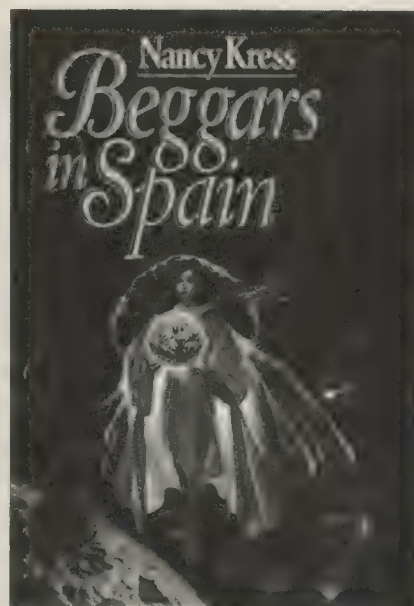
The fantastic elements of the Effect put me off at first, but my annoyance gradually fell away, and by the time it was given a science-fictional explanation I didn't much care one way or the other. Daniel's Indians are not cartoon good guys who love the earth; their culture includes slavery, a ferocious caste system, torture, and mutilation, but loyalty, bravery, and determination as well.

The plot is well constructed. Daniel knows how to plant important information so that we don't notice at the time and gradually reveal it. The explanation of a grand conspiracy at the end is confusing, though, and I'm still not quite clear on the relations among the various parties involved.

Will is a very sympathetic char-

acter, and his semi-outsider status — granted by way of a form of time travel — helps the reader identify with him. All the characters are believable, and, as in real life, they have complex motives and feelings, including those we could consider villains.

Daniel has a great gift for im-



agery, and his writing is often poetic. *Warpath* is a remarkable, imaginative first novel by a very talented writer.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Beggars in Spain

By Nancy Kress

AvoNova/Morrow, 1993

448 pp., \$23.00

Nancy Kress's multi-award-winning novella "Beggars in Spain" was a brilliant look at the creation of children who do not need to sleep. I approached its expansion into novel form with trepidation; too often this simply dilutes the original work. I'm happy to say that that's not the case here. While the first part — the original novella — is still the strongest, Kress has successfully created a plot of great scope and excitement that explores people and politics, with some important conclusions.

I won't do the plot an injustice by attempting to summarize it briefly, but it concerns the difficulty of accommodation between ordinary human society and the Sleepless, who not only need not sleep but are more intelligent, emotionally stable, and long-lived. Along the way Kress believably depicts a contract-libertarian society and a more collectivist one that develops recognizably from our own; she shows, without any preaching, why both are dead ends and human needs can only be met by a middle way, a welcome conclusion in these days when politics often seems reduced to extremes.

I don't want to make this sound like the tedious political novels we often see in SF; it is a story of people, and Kress depicts her characters, both Sleepers and Sleepless, libertarians and leeches, brilliantly, without a false note. Though politics is often central, the dramas are those of individuals. The future background is also remarkably well designed, as Kress shows a clear understanding of the implications of various technological advances. The plot works so seamlessly that you'll barely notice the occasional improbable coincidence it relies on.

Beggars in Spain is superb, important work. If Kress has sacrificed a bit of the power of the shorter length, she has

gained a complex tapestry of humanity and society that is not to be missed.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

The Initiate Brother

By Sean Russell

DAW, 1991

480 pp., \$4.99

and

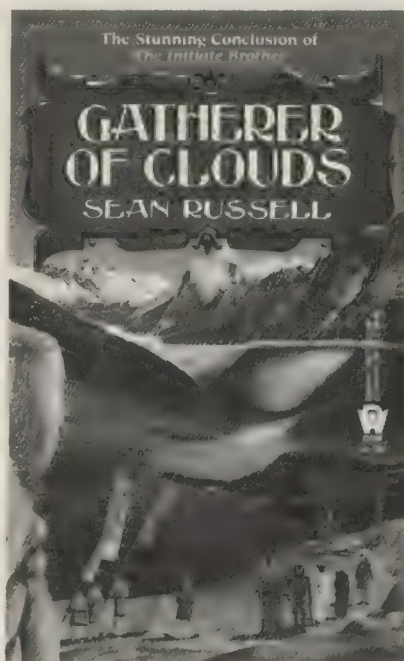
Gatherer of Clouds

By Sean Russell

DAW, 1992

604 pp., \$5.50

I'm reviewing these two books



together because they really make up one novel; had I picked up *The Initiate Brother* when it first came out, I'd have been very angry when it ended in the middle of the action. However, the two volumes taken together tell one very good, if over-long, story.

Sean Russell's books are set in an imaginary fantasy China which seems to have been settled by people we'd think of as Japanese. It is the kingdom of Wa, and, following a plague, the royal house has been overthrown. The new emperor, fearful for his throne, is making

many mistakes, including alienating the Botahist Brothers, who wield real magical power, and discounting the threat of a barbarian invasion from the north. The central character is Initiate Brother Shuyun, sent to be spiritual adviser to the powerful, but out-of-favor, Lord Shonto; it is up to them to defeat the barbarians and preserve the kingdom of Wa. There is also a spiritual aspect to the story, as Shuyun learns that his order is hiding the signs that the Great Teacher has finally been reborn.

The novel is enormous in scope and minutely detailed. Though well written, it could have been cut by a third without suffering. I enjoyed the long descriptions of Wa, its people, and its traditions, but in a slightly different mood I might not have had the patience for them. The host of characters are well drawn and credible, and they vary greatly.

If you enjoy epic novels, particularly historical fantasy, and can tolerate a plot that sometimes moves glacially, these books are for you. There's real magic here, and an unusual, fascinating culture, filled with interesting people. Russell is a writer to watch.

Rating: ☆☆☆1/2

Beautiful Soup:

A Novel for the 21st Century

By Harvey Jacobs

Celadon Press, 1993

263 pp., \$12.95

Harvey Jacobs writes in both genre and mainstream outlets, and *Beautiful Soup* has been published by a mainstream house. And in a sense it's not science fiction: the future isn't, and isn't supposed to be, believable. It's a satire, meant to illuminate and warn. Whether it does that, I don't know, but it definitely amuses and intrigues.

Beautiful Soup is the story of

James Wander, a rising young executive with a beautiful wife, two wonderful children, and a perfect life, in a society that has achieved stability by classifying everyone's potential at birth, and putting the information in bar codes on people's foreheads. Wander's life falls apart after a freak accident with a super-market scanner reclassifies him as a can of pea soup, and the novel follows his odyssey from yuppiedom to an insane asylum to prison and thence to even worse places. We are introduced to a wide variety of characters, from Morris Feuerbloom, the

Swiftian heights. It's well worth seeking out.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

The Wall at the Edge of the World

By Jim Aikin

Ace, 1993

320 pp., \$4.99

Few novels could live up to the line on the cover of *The Wall at the Edge of the World*: "The most brilliant science fiction novel of the year!" Jim Aikin's book is no exception. It is, however, a thoughtful, beautifully written exploration of familiar territory, with a few twists of its own.

Danlo Ree lives in a perfect society of telepaths, kept perfect by the Guidance of the joddies, and by the Cleansings of children without telepathic ability. He suppresses his discontent, until he discovers that the stories are wrong, that the Great Cleansing did not wipe out all of non-telepathic humanity, that people exist outside the Wall that delimits his world. The novel traces Danlo's attempts to learn about these people, who live a Stone-Age existence, and to use them to free his world, and to save the children.

As I said, this is familiar territory to SF readers, but Aikin mines it expertly. His society is detailed and fits together well, and we know there's more going

on below the surface. Aikin has the courage not to explain everything, and while this is sometimes frustrating, it gives the world a feeling of reality. He avoids the obvious, clichéd adventure plot, as well as providing an unexpected ending.

Danlo is difficult to like or to understand, coming as he does out of such an alien society, and screwing up so often. The primitive Linnie is more sympathetic and provides a good counterpoint. The other characters are often even more enigmatic than Danlo, yet we sense that there are reasons for their behavior, if

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**THE WALL AT THE
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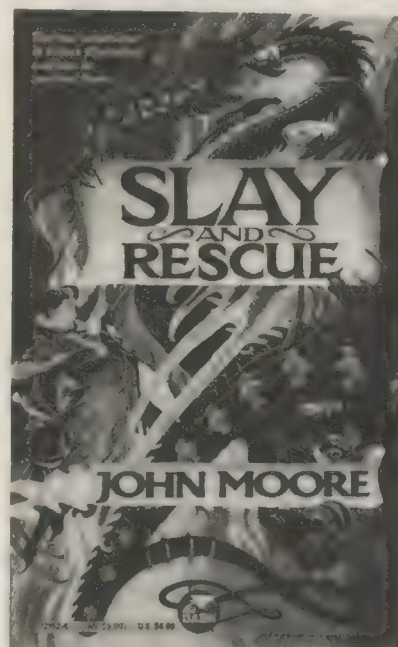


JIM AIKIN
"A GENUINELY TALENTED WRITER"
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ACE - 0-440-47140-2 - (\$5.99 CANADA) - \$4.99 U.S.

cranky old pyrotechnician, to Norman Cradle, the Rockwell-esque artist whose work has become society's central icon.

Most of the comedy is low, often quite vulgar, set against the squeaky-clean Norman Cradle perfection the society tries to make of itself. As a picaresque, the book works well; the attempt at a broader, overall plot is iffy, and the ending ambiguous.

Beautiful Soup is a funny, original novel not quite like any dystopia I've read before, and the satire occasionally achieves



we only understood them; it isn't arbitrary.

The Wall at the Edge of the World is not a masterpiece, but it is a fine contribution to the genre. Though sometimes difficult to read, it is rewarding.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Slay and Rescue

By John Moore

Baen, 1993

226 pp., \$4.99

The bookstore shelves — and this reviewer — have been overwhelmed with light fantasy in

Moving?

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the last few years; but John Moore's delightful *Slay and Rescue* stands out from the crowd. The beginning is too much of an attempt to be Terry Pratchett, but then Moore settles into his own voice as he tells the story of Prince Charming, disgruntled rescuer of princesses and slayer of dragons.

Moore's twist is to portray Charming and the princesses (who include Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella), appropriately enough, as teenagers. Not in the silly, stereotyped, passé-slang-throwing sense, but rather as uncom-

that these days.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Taylor's Ark

By Jody Lynn Nye

Ace, 1993

279 pp., \$4.99

I opened *Taylor's Ark* not expecting much, since the packaging makes it look like a sort of interstellar *All Creatures Great and Small*. In fact, the animals so prominently featured on the cover and in the blurbs are quite peripheral (with the exception of Chirwl, who's not really an animal at all). Jody Lynn Nye's novel centers on a human: Shona Taylor, a traveling doctor who has to find out why death keeps following her.

The book gets off to a bad start, with a couple of chapters loaded with expository lumps. But once the story gets going, it becomes a very enjoyable space adventure, with a likable heroine, interesting scenery, and an exciting plot.

The villain is so absolutely evil in his disregard for human life as to be almost unbelievable, but Nye is smart enough not to spend much time with him. It's Shona who carries the book, with Chirwl the alien an amusing companion. She's not as unbelievably super-competent as a Heinlein heroine, but she has the same sort of humor and fighting spirit.

Shona's society is not as well developed as I'd like; there's no real background given for the support for the pivotal piece of legislation forbidding mothers of young children to leave the planet, and Shona's experiences don't seem to reflect the kind of society that would pass such an act. It's there as a necessary plot device, is all. The individual space settlements she visits are varied and believable enough. One aspect of the happy ending is gratuitous in its sudden revocation of an earlier tragedy,

and the book would have been stronger without it.

Taylor's Ark is fun and well crafted, with a heroine you'll enjoy rooting for. Don't expect great art, but do expect a good time.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

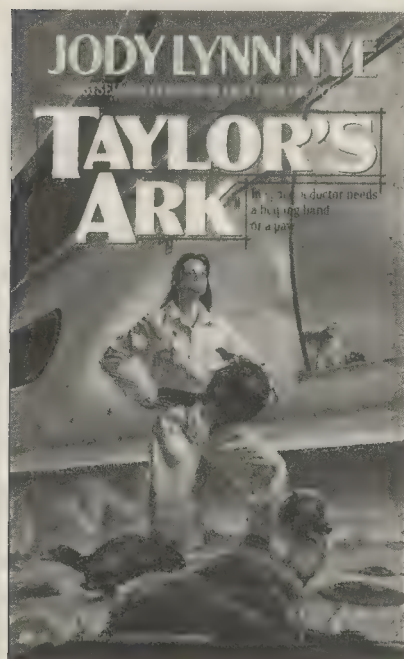
Mind Light

By Margaret Davis

Del Rey, 1993

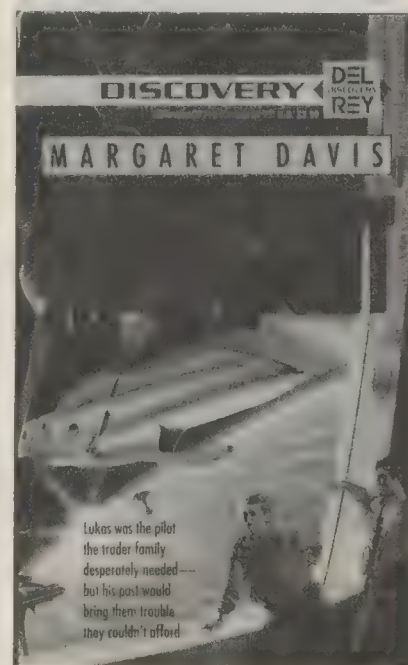
333 pp., \$3.99

Mind Light, a space opera by Margaret Davis, is a promising first novel. It is smoothly written, interesting, and involving,



fortable, obsessed with sex, unable to talk to the opposite sex ... anyone who's been a teenager will recognize them.

The plot is secondary in this sort of novel, but it almost makes sense. All the main characters work well, and my favorite is Wendell, Charming's pre-pubescent page, who's more interested in food than in princesses. Moore has a good sense of timing and knows how far he can carry a joke before it becomes tiresome. I laughed throughout *Slay and Rescue*, and it's not easy to make me do



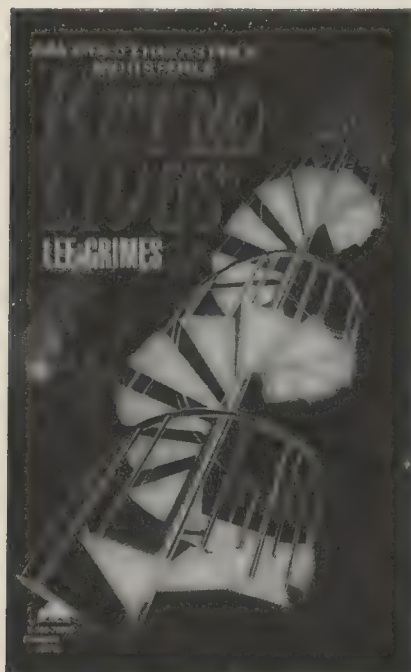
with a sympathetic heroine.

The plot defies explanation without spoiling the twists — in fact, I'd advise avoiding the back cover blurb for that reason. In the early sections we're in C.J. Cherryh territory, and things remain pretty derivative, down to the deep psychological manipulation, until the aliens come into it, when it takes off on its own.

Davis makes some first-timer's errors. She includes indigestible lumps of information in the first chapter, including unnecessary facts like the names of the two

crucial papers published by the scientist who discovered a method of FTL travel. After that the exposition is generally introduced unobtrusively, with the glaring exception of the beginning of Part Two, where two characters spend several pages telling each other things they already know. Also, a few things that happen early on and should have been explained never are.

However, Davis has a good sense of plot, and the book ends



at the right time, which is not the obvious place to end it. Her First Contact story works well, and her aliens give us a good sense of otherness. Of the two pro-tagonists, I like Kiley Michaelson a lot, but Greg Lukas remains somewhat enigmatic, perhaps deliberately. The standard-issue universe works fine. The politics of the story is the weakest link, but that's not a major problem.

Davis writes well, has interesting ideas, and demonstrates a good touch with character. I'm looking forward to her next novel.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Retro Lives

By Lee Grimes

AvoNova, 1993

208 pp., \$4.50

Retro Lives begins with an intriguing idea: a man who, when he reaches a certain age, begins aging backwards — losing his memories of each day as it falls away — until he reaches his youth and begins to age forward again. This odd type of immortality seems to have a lot of promise as the basis of a novel. Unfortunately, Lee Grimes's debut does not work because of a basic problem with its structure and premise.

The enjoyable first section, where we discover the details of Robert Widdick's condition, clearly draws its inspiration from the work of Oliver Sacks, and that's all to the good. Sadly, as the book continues it quickly becomes evident that it fails because there's no one to identify with, and, worse, no one to care about. We jump from character to character telling the story; even when we return to a character, he isn't really the same person, since he has forgotten the previous lives he has lived. The problem is exacerbated because the stories, though first-person, are told nearly emotionlessly.

The plot is an interesting one, which earns the book its rating, but the structure simply does not work as a novel.

Rating: ☆☆ 1/2

3 For Space

By William F. Nolan

Gryphon Books, 1992

60 pp., \$19.95 hc, \$9.95 pb

Yes, *3 For Space* is by the William F. Nolan, of *Logan's Run*, movies, TV, etc. So why is he writing for a small press that can't even figure out not to use the letter O where a zero is needed? I'll tell you why: the stories aren't very good.

The three stories, set in an old-fashioned super-science future, feature detective Sam Space. The first two, "Sungrab" and "Moonjob," which are reprints, are all right as diversions — "Sungrab" being the better of the two — if you like silly hard-boiled pastiches. "Deadtrip," new to this volume, is dumb, with a plot that makes no sense even within its own context.

3 For Space affords some amusement, but not \$9.95 worth.

Rating: ☆☆



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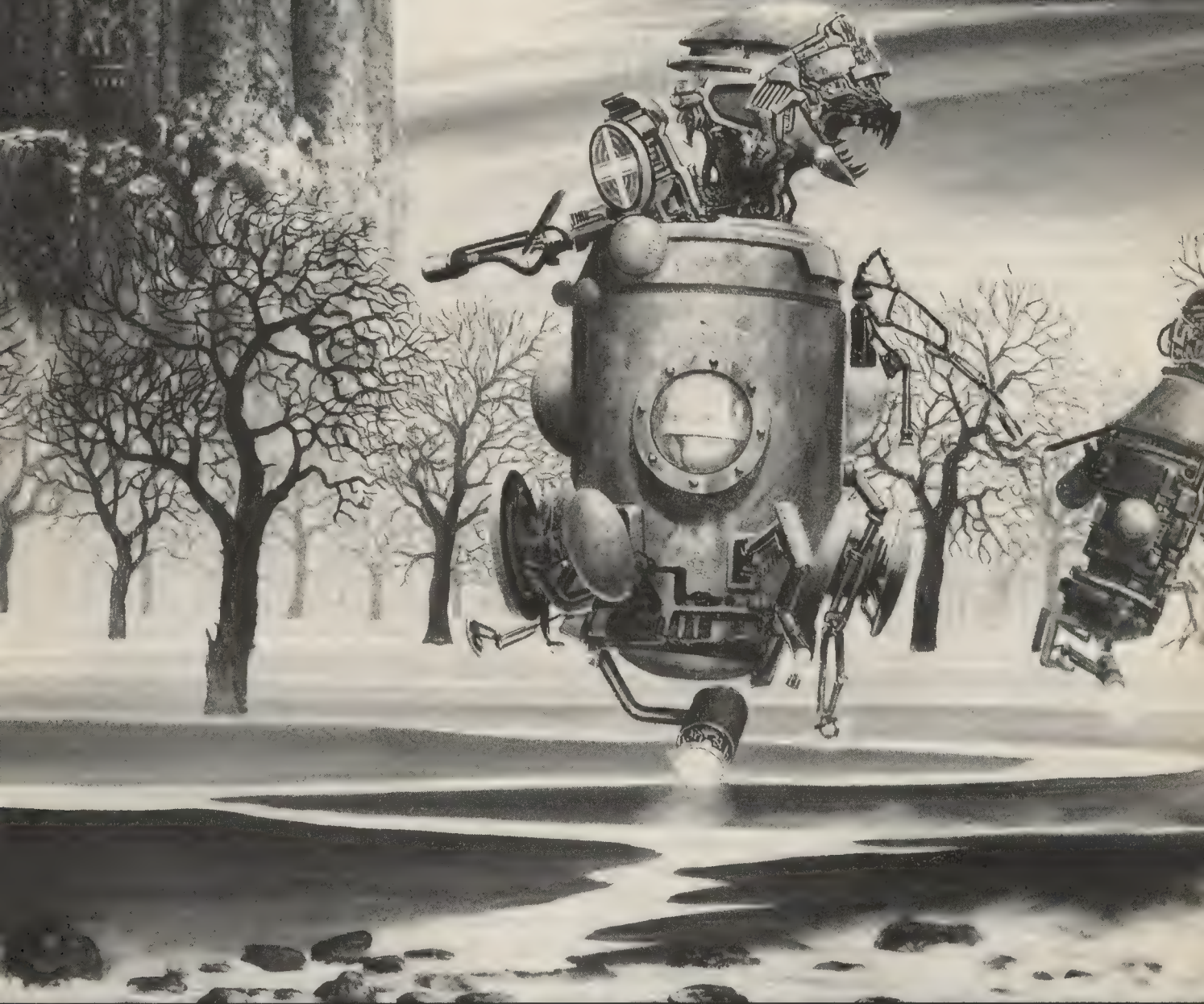
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Getting the Details Right



Fiction writing is not an occupation for the slovenly. I don't mean you have to wear a tie and bathe once a week whether you need it or not ... No, I mean it makes few allowances for *mental* slovenliness.

As Mark Twain put it, you must say what you intend to say, rather than come somewhere close.

It's possible to become obsessive about details. Lots of writers do. There are so many opportunities, particularly in a long work, for words or phrases to misfire. You *can't* pay as much attention to each and every word in a 100,000-word novel as you do to those in a 1,500-word short story, try as you may. So, an awkward phrase here, a redundancy there slips by, and gradually has a cumulative effect. ("Why don't I like this book? I can't quite put my finger on it.") The author, skimming through a copy of the published work, inevitably finds something that makes him cringe.

When I first got a copy of my book *The White Isle*, my eye was immediately directed (by the whimsically malevolent gods) to this sentence on page 47:

Their bodies were metal too, thin as skeletons, covered with black flesh drawn tight, like leather drawn tight over iron rods.

This is a species of typo almost unique to the electronic age. I probably revised that sentence on the screen, changing the verbs, and failed to remove one "drawn tight" or the other. It gets worse when you remove something, a

phrase or even a plot element, and fail to find all the subsequent referents.

Or, you encounter something like I did last year, when nearing the end of a long novel. There's a scene in which the hero is instantly transported to a far northern country, lands barefoot in knee-deep snow, and is startled by the novelty while nearly freezing to death. But since the rest of the book is set in a pre-industrial pseudo-Egypt where there are no refrigerators, the protagonist has never previously seen frozen water in any form. Since he's writing the text in the first person, in bits and snatches like a diary, rather than all at once after the action is over, he should never, even metaphorically, use such words as "ice-cold," "frigid," etc.

It was just one of many details. Sure, one of the benefits of the electronic age is that you can do a search on key words, but what I finally did about it was hire the best proofreader I know to go over the finished novel, both for typos and for this sort of detail. The manuscript came back covered with hundreds of little yellow slips. I got my money's worth.

That was a fantasy novel (an expansion of my novella, "To Become a Sorcerer"); it would have

been even worse if it had been science fiction. In science fiction, quite often, the details virtually *are* the story. Not only does the author have to watch for such fine points as the conceptual vocabulary of the first-person narrator — then come the *science fictional* details.

You may recall the famous line from Heinlein's *Beyond This Horizon*, a sentence containing the phrase "the door dilated." Just like that, in the middle of the scene, the door dilates. The characters, because they live in a world where dilating doors are part of everyday life, do not remark on it, much less (as they did in Hugo Gernsback's day) give one another lectures on the workings of dilating doors. We don't point to the electric light overhead and say, "Fellow citizen, isn't it amazing how we have tamed the power of lightning thus?" No, we just switch the light on. (Let me recommend "Masters of the Metropolis" by Randall Garrett and Lin Carter — in Garrett's *Takeoff!* — as a delightful send-up of the Gernsbackian lecture mode.)

We *switch* the *light* on, rather than activate the bulb. The language of the things we take for granted becomes an important part of the way we perceive and describe our world. This is why no one in a pre-gunpowder setting should ever talk about "firing" an arrow. That's a gun metaphor. And, was "switch" a verb before

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

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there were electrical switches?

But sometimes a phrase like that stays in the language after the detail which engendered it is gone. We still speak of a "flash in the pan," which has to do with flintlock muskets. We still "dial" a number even when most phones are touch-tone. Quite possibly the next generation will still say "enemy planes at seven o'clock" — meaning direction — even though few clocks have hands or circular faces anymore.

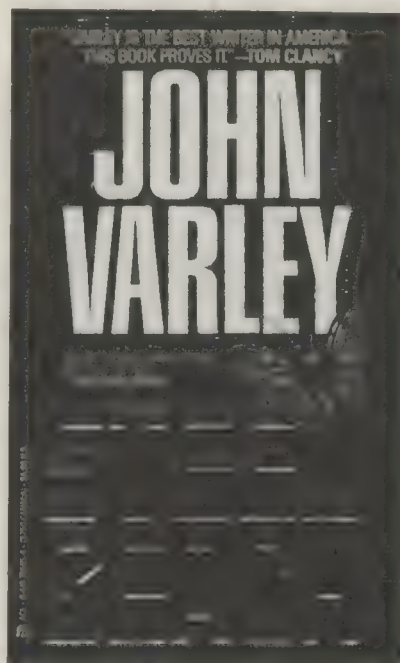
The science fiction writer extrapolates this sort of detail into the future. Imagine what parts of 20th-Century vocabulary would be strange to an 18th-Century man. Then imagine what parts of a 22nd-Century vocabulary would be strange to the reader. Definitions get worked in by inference, rather than direct exposition. And the characters in Heinlein's novel can't say things like "Shut the door when you leave" any more than they can slam a door in a fit of pique (or compare something to the noise of a slamming door) if they live in a world of automatically dilating apertures.

Details pile up, layer upon layer. Much old science fiction dates because the people in it are not people of the future at all, but those of the 1890s, or the 1940s, or the 1960s. Their attitudes toward women or racial minorities. Their attitudes toward cigarette-smoking. All these things stand out from the perspective of a couple decades. And it's safe to say that any writer who caves in to the Political Correctness fascists is just asking for obsolescence as soon as the party line shifts. (Again, the creative SF writer might be able to write a story of the future from the point of view of some Political Correctness shift which hasn't happened yet.)

And more: the people of the future have lived through — or at least remember — a lot of history which is still in the future from the perspective of the reader. A phrase like "Political Correctness

fascists" wouldn't have made any sense in 1900 — or in 1940 for that matter. We had to wait for "fascist" to become a loose, derogatory term. So the historical depth becomes something, like dilating doors, which the characters take for granted, but which colors their thinking and language.

Get this wrong, and the setting fails to convince. In George Alec Effinger's *When Gravity Fails*, for instance, the time of the action is given as the late 22nd Century. (Page 8; the hero was born in 2172.) Well, I thought after a while, if this is the 22nd Century,



there doesn't seem to have been a 21st. The hero wears jeans. All the cultural referents — books, movies, etc. — are to the 20th Century. Everybody knows who James Bond is. They read Agatha Christie and Rex Stout. *And nothing else seems to have been written since.* While Effinger's world is self-consistent, it was a *bad* mistake to set the action that far ahead. I would almost be willing to believe the date was a typo. The "future feel" of Effinger's book is no more than thirty or forty years hence.

And we haven't even *started* to consider extrapolative scientific details yet

No doubt about it, if you're going to take science fiction writing seriously, you've got to be real smart and a bit obsessive. It's like juggling a whole bucketful of ball-bearings all at once.

Steel Beach

By John Varley
Ace/Putnam, 1992
479 pp., \$22.95

This is Varley's "comeback" novel. He has been away for several years, laboring in the vineyards of Hollywood, still writing occasional shorter fiction, but basically out of sight of his audience. As far as I can tell, the Hollywood adventure produced only the underwhelming movie *Millennium*, and the novel of the same title (which also had little impact).

So, in an aggressive attempt to re-establish himself, Varley has taken up his Eight Worlds series again, and produced a massive example of all the things that made him famous in the first place. Thus his career resumes as if it had never been interrupted.

Steel Beach is rich in detail. It is a tour-de-force of the sort of extrapolation which Heinlein was the first to master, taking place in a future which clearly is the product of several centuries of future development, and not just straight-line projection either. There have been rude interruptions and a lot of surprises. History works like that, which is why we are not living today in a bigger and better Roman Empire. There were zigs and zags along the way.

The biggest interruption in Varley's future was an alien invasion which wiped out all human life on Earth. No doubt it takes some audacity to set up that as just one of the many "givens" in the background of a novel, but then again, this is a book which opens with the line, "*In five years, the penis will be obsolete,*" said the salesman, and in the space of less than a page makes that, too, part

of the commonplace world.

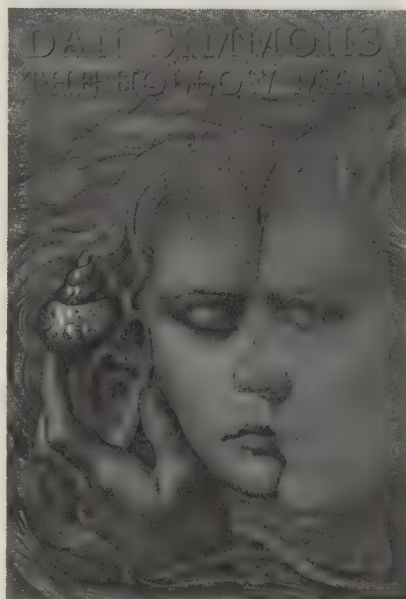
Fortunately, mankind was well established in the rest of the solar system when the Invasion happened, and the aliens don't seem to care, as long as the Earth is left alone. So, everyone's perceptions are colored by a mixture of survivor's guilt, paranoia, nostalgia, and a frantic effort to forget. The Lunar society of *Steel Beach* is filled with diversions, entertainments, strange social movements, and cults (even one which deifies old-time music stars, starting with Elvis). There are huge theme parks called "Disneylands" which try to recreate specific environments from Earth's past. People change their gender as casually as they change their clothes. (If they bother to wear clothes.) Halfway through the book, the hero becomes a heroine. He/she is a reporter, and rather old-fashioned in his/her reliance on a keyboard set below the skin of the palm of the hand, rather than using direct computer interface to turn in stories.

All of this is extremely well realized. With Heinlein gone, Varley may well be the most able practitioner we have of this sort of "lived in" future. (Which is why I am particularly irritated by the afterword, in which Varley confesses himself unwilling to go back and reread all the other stories in this series to get the historical details consistent. God damn it, Herb, that is your job. Either do it yourself or hire a fan to make you a concordance. No excuses.)

But you'll notice I haven't said anything about the plot. Yes, there is one. It moves sluggishly, not lost in the details, but weaving among them. While the setting isn't a utopia — none of the characters thinks so, anyway — the conflict is of the crisis-in-utopia sort. The suicide rate is going up. Life is losing its meaning as humanity stagnates, knowing full well it has been checkmated by the vastly superior and incomprehensible aliens. Worse yet, the

Central Computer, who runs Lunar society (within carefully proscribed limits) is beginning to feel depressed — and step out of bounds.

I suppose it's fairest to say that *Steel Beach* has greater science-fictional strengths than novelistic ones. It is a wonderland of thoughtful — if superficially outrageous — details. The characters don't have a lot of depth, though. They serve to focus the narrative and carry us through the wandering plot and the adequate prose, but there's nothing here which will hit you over the head and leave you with a lump that won't



go away; which is the difference between a great book and a merely good one.

Oh, expect this to be a Hugo contender.

Rating: ☆☆☆1/2

The Hollow Man
By Dan Simmons
Bantam, 1992
293 pp., \$20.00

I just don't know about this one ... *The Hollow Man* is an expansion of what was actually Simmons's first sale, "Eyes I Dare Not Meet in Dreams" (published in *Omni*, but held up so that his

prize-winner in the *Twilight Zone* contest, "The River Styx Runs Upstream," could appear first). It was a good story, and when all is said and done, I am not completely sure that the novel accomplishes anything more than the story did.

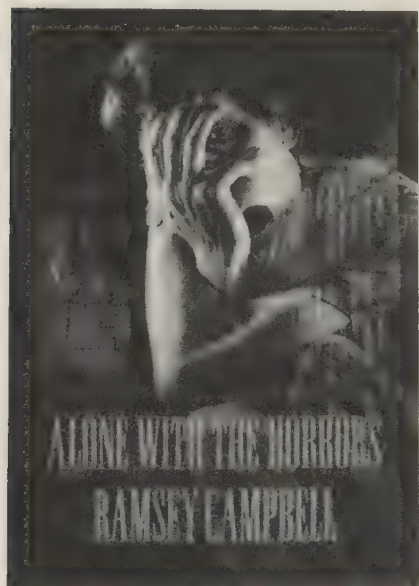
Sticking with this column's discussion of details, let me suggest that the problem here is one of *symbolic detail*.

Both the story and the novel start with a beautifully-rendered, heart-wrenching situation: Jeremy Bremen, telepath, has shared a mind-link with his wife Gail for some years. Now she is dying of cancer. Rather than sit by her side in the hospital room (in Philadelphia), he drives to the New Jersey shore and waits at a particular spot on the beach, so he can "share" with her the experience of being at this special place one last time. Enter a third telepath, Robby, blind, deaf, and retarded since birth, who lives in a fantasy world of his own making. The story ends somewhat ambiguously, with Jeremy, Gail, and Robby joined into one person. The novel ends pretty much the same way, only this time Jeremy has shot himself, either escaping into an alternate-probability universe or, like the character in a Borges story who lives out an entire lifetime in a few seconds before a firing squad, suspended in a subjective instant of time which seems to go on forever.

On the way to this conclusion, Jeremy has a breakdown, burns his house, flees, coincidentally witnesses a gangster dumping a body in a Florida swamp, is kidnapped by the gangster, escapes from Disney World disguised as Goofy, lives as a wino on the streets of Denver, escapes a female cannibal, starts winning in Las Vegas, gets kidnapped by the *same gangster again* — and so on. On the basic page-turning level, this novel is a success. Simmons is a fine craftsman. He keeps you lurching through all the coincidences and plot-tangles, just to

see what happens next. He even manages to build up a pretty good theoretical model of what telepathy might be like. Such as it is possible to be scientific on such a subject, the science here is as "hard" as anything in Hal Clement.

What doesn't really work is all the symbolism. The whole thing has a Dantean gloss. (With titles of both novel and short story from T.S. Eliot, by the way.) It is possible to read the whole book without even noticing it, and maybe the reader would be better off *not* noticing, but it gets difficult to ignore. The hotel keeper in the Florida swamp is named "Verge." (But he doesn't accompany the hero, as Vergil accompanied



Dante.) There's a chapter called "Geryon," in which Jeremy is flown east from Vegas in a small plane, by the gangsters. Geryon is the giant who lowers Dante down to another level. That's not really what's happening here. The man-eating psycho/lady rancher is defeated in a giant meat freezer, sprayed with water and frozen to death. This is clearly supposed to echo the lowest circle of Hell, where Satan is encountered frozen in a plain of ice, chewing on traitors (Brutus and Judas). But there are no traitors here. What

does it "mean" that "Satan" is female, or that Jeremy kills her? Why should the lowest circle of Hell be encountered at this point, since it is *not* a logical progression from what has gone before, but a coincidence (the lady rancher picks up Jeremy along a roadside) which could have happened at several other times during the novel? And after the lowest circle is reached, Jeremy, unlike Dante, is not necessarily on his way up.

In other words, the *Inferno* stuff fails to provide a coherent metaphorical skeleton for the book. It doesn't seem to mean *anything*. It's just there, pretentiously, to be recognized. While this sort of metaphorical/mythic plan has worked in many novels in the past, it doesn't in *The Hollow Man*, precisely because Simmons hasn't gotten all the details consistent or right.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Two Masters of Murk

Alone With the Horrors
By Ramsey Campbell
Arkham House, 1993
515 pp., \$26.95

Grimscribe, His Lives and Works
By Thomas Ligotti
Carroll & Graf, 1991
214 pp., \$18.95

Murkiness, uncertainty about what is going on in a scene, is almost always a fatal flaw in science fiction. In SF, if ideas are not expressed clearly, if the reader can't figure out what things look like and how they work, the story is going to come crashing to a halt.

In horror fiction, sometimes a bit of confusion can be a real strength. There is a whole strain of horror fiction, from Nathaniel Hawthorne through Robert W. Chambers all the way up to Robert Aickman, in which the author sets a deliberate barrier between the reader and final comprehension, thus capturing the es-

sence and feel of true nightmare.

It's still a fiendishly difficult technique to pull off. Let's make some distinctions here. (I am borrowing terms from, I believe, Gardner Dozois and Ben Bova.) *Micromurky* means that you can't tell what is going on, at the level of incidental action and detail. Are there three people in the room, or two? Are they in a room? Is there a hat on the bed or not? *Macromurky* means that, while the incidentals are clear enough, and we can "see" each scene and action as they take place, the overall plan or meaning of the story isn't clear. *Ambiguous* means that the choices are laid out clearly enough, but no answer is provided. Hawthorne was a master of ambiguity, as was Henry James. To be so, they had to avoid *micromurkiness* at all costs, which in such a story (say, "Young Goodman Brown" or "The Turn of the Screw") would have been like an out-of-focus camera in a surrealist film. *Macromurkiness* must be balanced delicately, so that the reader has at least an intuitive grasp of the overall pattern of the story, even if the final answers are not provided.

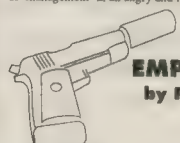
Ramsey Campbell and Thomas Ligotti both write this way, Ligotti

**The Alien Publisher's
First Novel**

If you enjoy *Aboriginal's* "Message From Our Alien Publisher," you'll love the creature's first novel. *Lifetime Employment* by Floyd Kemske (obviously a pseudonym), is filled with the bizarre and pessimistic insights into the human condition that readers of this magazine have come to know and love (or at least puzzle over).

"Told in a dry, matter-of-fact way, this is a black comedy, both hilarious and horrifying."
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

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Boston Globe



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more than Campbell. *Alone With the Horrors* is a thirty-year retrospective of Campbell's work, ranging from pseudo-Lovecraftian juvenilia to recent, very sophisticated fiction. Campbell can be genuinely ambiguous. More often, though, he is explicit but extremely understated, in the manner of M.R. James. There is no doubt, for instance, that the ghost of the long-dead derelict drowned the boy in "Macintosh Willy" (a World Fantasy Award winner), but the whole effect of the story comes from not coming out and *saying so*. Campbell manipulates details very well, to create disquiet, or, once in a while (as in "Out of Copyright" or "Heading Home") to deftly parody the expected effect.

Ligotti is a more problematical writer. Sometimes you have to read his stories several times (*certainly* only one at a time, never several in one sitting) before they stick in the memory. His prose is not as concise or as crisp as it sometimes should be. But once his best stories have had time to sink in, they are subtle and brilliant, among the most innovative horror fiction of the past several decades. On the strength of just two collections (the other one is *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*) Ligotti is firmly established as a major post-Lovecraftian figure. His stories are very dreamlike, almost the prose equivalent of *Eraserhead* or *The Andalusian Dog*, frequently turning on the Gnostic idea that the "true" reality is within us, not immediately perceptible without discarding the material world first. Only, where the Gnostics found the divine light, Ligotti discovers horror. "Nethescurial," for instance (one of the finest and most audacious stories he's written) deals explicitly with a filth or contagion pervading the entire universe, so that to even know of it is to be contaminated ... and even when you've read this review, it's Too Late ... "The Last Feast of Harlequin" is audacious

in another sense: it is perhaps the most effective "Lovecraftian" story published since the death of Lovecraft, one of the dozen or so (mostly by T.E.D. Klein, Fritz Leiber, and Fred Chappell) which manage to do the Master proud.

Ratings:

Campbell: ☆☆☆☆

Ligotti: ☆☆☆☆

Noted:



The Collected Ghost Stories of E. F. Benson
Carroll & Graf, 1992
624 pp. \$10.95

Edward Frederic Benson (1867-1940) is best remembered today as a humorist of the P.G. Wodehouse sort, the author of the "Mapp" and "Lucia" series which are now widely reprinted and even franchised out to other writers.

But "Fred" Benson also wrote ghost and horror stories of uncommon power, which is perhaps not at all surprising considering his bizarre family: the father a bisexual Archbishop of Canterbury over-fond of "floggings"; a lesbian mother; two siblings dead; a mad sister; brother Arthur lost in depressions for years at a time; brother Hugh shocking everybody

by turning arch-Catholic and confidante of the Pope. Had the Bensons not existed, Edward Gorey would have invented them.

Fred was the "normal" one, sportsman, toast of high society, prolific author, and even mayor of Rye late in life. Beneath the discreet facade were the inevitable tensions, not the least his own repressed homosexuality.

His ghost stories display a genius for creepy detail. He was fond of almost-physical, thoroughly malevolent manifestations: crab-clawed worms ("Caterpillars"), bloodsucking apparitions ("Mrs. Amsworth"), an enormous spectral slug ("Negotium Perambulans"), and even a Yeti-like she-monster of the Alps ("The Horror Horn"). His returning dead are a ghastly lot: the sadistic husband who hounds lovers to their deaths in "The Dance," the murdered children no one may look upon in "How Fear Departed from the Long Gallery." Comic relief shines through but rarely. (Though "The Psychological Mallards" is *extremely* funny.)

Don't read all of Benson's ghost stories at once. The leisured bachelors, the elegant haunted houses tend to blur together. The focus is on the phenomenon or incident, rather than on plot or character. Spooks inexorably set out to do their worst. Think of it as *Upstairs, Downstairs* by George

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Romero. There's an undeniable element of formula, but it's the formula of a box of chocolates. One at a time, the contents can be delicious.

While Benson was not as great a writer as Poe or Lovecraft or Machen, he did have a special quality, best expressed by the elderly Lord Halifax, the celebrated collector of "true" ghost stories, who exclaimed during one of Benson's readings, "It's too frightful! Go on, go on. I can't bear it!"

All the stories from Benson's four main collections, *Spook Stories*, *More Spook Stories*, *Visible and Invisible*, and *The Room in the Tower* are herewith collected. Beyond this, the completist only needs the volume of spectral strays, *The Flint Knife*, published by Equation a couple years back.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Iron Tears

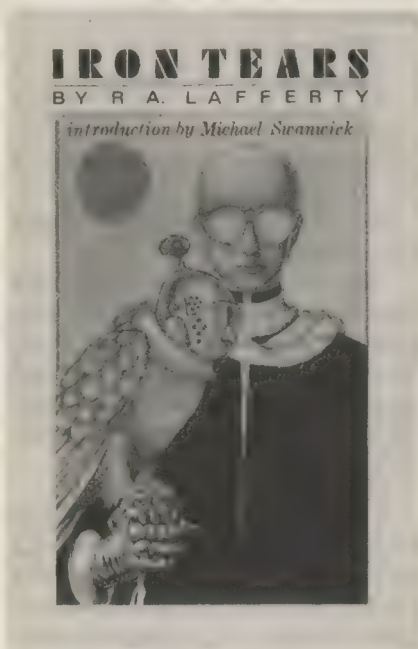
By R.A. Lafferty
Edgewood Press, 1992
219 pp., \$10.00

R.A. Lafferty, so Michael Swanwick tells us in the introduction, is perhaps the best and most original science fiction writer ever. He is also *unpublishable*, beyond the heroic efforts of a handful of small-press publishers determined to rescue every word he ever wrote from oblivion. (Good production values this time. Cover by Leo and Diane Dillon.)

A curious state of affairs. Were he Spanish-surnamed, he could be a "magic realist" and get mainstream recognition. Maybe. He comes from a completely different tradition: Irish, Catholic, old American tall-tale telling. He bears a superficial resemblance to Flann O'Brien. Were Mark Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog" somehow science fiction, it would probably be a Lafferty story. Other than that, we can only regret that the publishing niche for humor in science fiction

and fantasy has largely been captured by kiddylit. Lafferty's novels are erudite. They are, let's face it, hard to understand much of the time. If they were put in the same niche as Piers Anthony the readers would be totally befuddled and would definitely not come back for more.

The other problem is that short story collections "don't sell," according to the popular wisdom, and Lafferty's most accessible work is his short fiction. Most of the stories in *Iron Tears* are



whimsies, grand ones, often with deeper meanings. My very favorite Lafferty story of all, "You Can't Go Back," is in this volume. Go and read it and see why it is so special. (Order from Edgewood Press, P.O. Box 264, Cambridge MA 02238. Add \$1.50 for postage.)

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

Autobiographical Writings

By H.P. Lovecraft
Edited by S.T. Joshi
Necronomicon Press, 1992
38 pp., \$4.95

This one is largely for the specialist, a pamphlet collecting several essays and scraps, including the unadulterated version of "Some Notes on a Nonentity" and

"A Confession of Unfaith" (in which HPL recalls asking in Sunday school why, if Santa Claus is an obvious myth, God isn't one too). Also, an amusing speech given at an amateur press convention in 1921. But Lovecraft's real autobiography is in his letters. These are only sidelights.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Witches of the Mind: A

Critical Study of Fritz Leiber
By Bruce Byfield
Necronomicon Press, 1991
76 pp., \$9.95

I overlooked this when it came out, and so did, I guess, quite a lot of people. It's a disgrace this was not published by a major university press, or at least the Twayne American Authors series. Fritz Leiber was one of the great fantasists, a major writer by any standard, and Byfield's book (with large pages and small print, it is a book, too, crammed into the usual Necronomicon Press format) is by far the best thing ever written about him, and one of the most illuminating critical works you're likely to read about anyone. Its plan follows Leiber's philosophical/mythic development, dividing his career into "Lovecraftian Period," "Gravesian Period," "Early Jungian Period," and "Late Jungian Period." While Leiber was still alive when this came out (and even has a recommendation for the book on the back), sadly, he didn't write anything more of significance, so this may well be, for years to come, the standard work.

Kudos to Necronomicon Press for having the sense to publish this when nobody else did.

(Necronomicon Press, 101 Lockwood St., West Warwick, RI 02893.)

Rating: ☆☆☆☆ □

— *The contest to explode your head*

Imagination



*Imagination, which in truth
Is but another name for absolute
power
And clearest insight, amplitude
of mind,
And reason in her most exalted
mood.*

— William Wordsworth
(1770-1850)

Warning!

I am about to go on a tirade.

As those of you who have been reading this column for the past few years will possibly remember, what pays my rent is working as a researcher at the Hughes Research Labs in Malibu, California. I grow thin films, atomic layer by atomic layer, that are in turn transformed into high-speed transistors. Recently, while at a meeting (not a unique experience), a View Graph, our primary method of communication, was slapped up onto an overhead projector and an engineer proceeded to sell to upper management his *new* idea as to how to grow diamond films.

Upper management was very attentive.

Diamond films are in vogue at the moment. Nothing conducts heat better than diamond, and if you could actually build a transistor out of diamond it could operate in absolutely hellish environments — such as under the hood of your car.

This represents a big market.

Billions of dollars are up for grabs.

So upper management was very attentive. Their yearly bonuses depend directly on funding those new ideas that ultimately improve the company's bottom line.

The idea was novel, way out there. It had ultraviolet lasers, methane injectors, ultra-high vacuum chambers, and several bells and whistles that I couldn't even identify.

It was highly *imaginative*.

The engineer informed the audience that nothing like this had ever been attempted before. This was his big mistake. Upper management proceeded to shred both him and his proposal.

Will never work.

The physics won't permit it.

The capital investment is too great.

Can't get that much power out of an ultraviolet laser.

Can't buy those injectors on the open market.

This looked like one more idea destined for the trash can, but then someone in the back of the room stood up, cleared his throat, and mumbled a simple statement that altered reality as those in the room viewed it:

"Fujitsu is trying to do this."

There was a collective intake of breaths, eyes grew wide, and the dominant manager, the alpha of the pack, demanded to know how we'd gotten behind the Japanese on this technique, one which obviously we pioneered, and what resources it would take for us to regain our lead.

I left the meeting feeling disgusted.

This was no isolated incident, nor is it unique to where I work. This attitude permeates every industry and seems burned into the brains of every person I encounter. The novel, the new, the imaginative are simply too dangerous. If that fear is insufficient to kill a new idea, then the initial attack is closely followed with the attitude that this imaginative thing can't possibly work or else someone would already have done it.

Imagination has become a dirty word.

Let me relate a couple of personal experiences concerning how our educational system fosters such attitudes. My first encounter with the

dogmatic powers that be occurred in kindergarten. Our assignment was to paint a picture of our pet. At the time I had one of those little turtles that usually last about a week between the pet store and backyard funeral, so I proceeded to paint a picture of my turtle in profile — first the shell, then his head complete with smiling face, but I got into trouble when I came to the legs. I just couldn't figure out how to draw those legs, how to show them poking out of the side of the shell. One by one my classmates finished paintings of their pets and were allowed to go to recess. Finally when it became totally obvious that legs on turtles were simply beyond my abilities, I took a different approach. I put wheels on my turtle. I then proudly turned in my painting and attempted to head out to the playground. But the teacher was not impressed with my innovative turtle design and I was told to sit back down. I was informed that turtles don't have wheels and that until I corrected the deficiency I could not go out to the playground.

Well, I never made it to the playground. But I did learn a lesson that day. Don't deviate from the acceptable solution — imagination will get you in trouble.

At the other end of my academic spectrum I spent nine years of my life at UCLA in quest of a B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. In those years I took nearly 100 technical courses. All those classes were basically the same: learn these equations, understand how this machine works, solve problems 1-12 at the end of chapter four. Chew it up, digest it, and then spit it back out.

It made an engineer out of me, teaching me how to do the same things in the same way as the fifty other students in each of my classes.

In addition, however, the system did its best to destroy the little imagination that had survived from my public school experience. I'd been taught the right way to do things, the accepted way to do things, the way that had always worked in the past. I'd learned that turtles can't have wheels and that, unless reality can be represented by handy-dandy differential equations (an extremely small subset of reality), we will simply ignore it.

But I survived, and slowly yet surely, by thinking as many deviant thoughts as possible, by reading as much science fiction as possible, my battered imagination was slowly healed — but it took a lot of practice to develop the somewhat twisted and bent perspective that I have today.

Look at the title of this column.

What If?

I chose that title for a very real reason. When it comes to moving forward, moving beyond where you are, that is the question that must be asked, the question that is always asked before a real change can be made. That's what I've tried to help you see for the past several years, telling you about people and the new ideas that they've generated as a consequence of asking *what if?*

So what is Bob Metzger getting to?

Where is this tirade leading to?

There *are* imaginative people out there. The world is not quite as bleak as the one I painted above. Close, but not quite. My years at UCLA were not all multiple-choice, fill in the blank, solve equation No. 22-B-type questions. My Ph.D. thesis advisor had the wonderful good sense to let his students stumble onto our own problems in the lab and then let us bash our ignorant little heads against the walls as we tried to solve them. He came to our rescue only when the trickle of blood that dripped down our foreheads became a torrent. He taught me probably the most valuable lesson I ever learned — not how to solve some specific thesis problem, but that if a problem can't be solved in one way, then try another, and if that doesn't work, then try yet another. Try something weird, try something different. Try to use your *imagination*.

And I did.

But I also watched imaginative people, watched what they do and how they do it. I tried to learn from them, understand the methodology that they use to maintain as well as to increase their creativity. Where do these new ideas come from, these imaginative, novel solutions to problems?

Do you have to be a genius?

Do you have to work 100 hours a week?

Do you need to wear a torn lab-coat and forget to comb your hair?

Do you need a brain tumor?

No — although those things might help.

What you need is practice. After twenty years of watching *Gilligan's Island* reruns and knowing that Ginger managed to get some eighty-seven different evening gowns onto the island or that Mary Ann baked over 12,000 coconut cream pies, the old imagination center of your brain has gone a bit flat. But all is not lost. There is a universal law that applies to the imagination — the more you imagine, the more you can imagine. That's what these creative people know.

And you already have a tremendous leg up. You're reading this magazine, wanting to immerse yourself in a story in which something impossible has occurred, something beyond the world as you know it. But no matter how great the story, how exhilarating the adventure, how absolutely *imaginative* the plot, you are still operating in a passive mode, still counting those coconut cream pies.

You need to take the next step.

And I'm here to help you. I want you to exercise that imagination of yours, blow off the cobwebs, and oil those squeaking gears.

Announcement.

Announcement.

Announcement.

The *What If? Stretch Your Imagination Until Your Head Explodes* Contest is now open for your submissions. If you choose to enter this contest you will be following in the footsteps of the greatest imaginations humankind has ever produced — Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, and even the army of bureaucrats who created the United States tax laws.

Breathe easy, relax, try not to faint.

But it's true.

If you are one of ten lucky winners, the fruits of your imagination will grace the pages of this magazine in a future installment of *What If?*

Unbelievable but true.

Take it easy for a few minutes and relax. I know the prospects of appearing in this column are spectacularly mind-numbing (blowing?). Before I explain to you the nuts and bolts of the contest, I'll entice you even further into participating in this grand event by letting you know just how it will benefit you, beyond, of course, the obvious admiration and jealousy of both friends and enemies when you show them your imaginative little jewel gracing these pages.

Every day I try to solve as many meaningless problems as possible,

Moving?

If you plan to move between now and July, please notify us. It takes several weeks for a change of address to get entered into the database, and you wouldn't want to miss your next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

The U.S. Postal Service doesn't always forward copies. When it doesn't, it destroys them, charging us 35 cents for the privilege. That's why we cannot replace lost copies without an additional fee, if you move and don't tell us. Thanks for your cooperation.

problems of no practical importance to anyone or anything. The reason for this is to keep me flexible, to keep my brain lubricated enough so that when some real problem bites me in the butt I might be able to solve it.

For example, a few mornings ago, when I awoke and stumbled out of bed, I stubbed my toe. As I hopped around the room I found myself wondering just how long it took the pain signal in my throbbing toe to reach my brain. So I limped down to my office, riffled through a few books, and found that nerve impulses travel upwards of 50 meters per second. That means that the signal traveling between toe and brain only takes 0.04 seconds. Not much time at all. And then I thought what would happen if you had one of those standard planetary-spanning-type creatures, those that populate interstellar space sucking interstellar hydrogen down their ramjet throats, then fusing it in their reactor guts. You know those types of aliens. If that creature was about as large as the distance from Earth to the Moon, had the same nervous system as I do, and smashed its toes on a passing asteroid, I wondered, when would its brain feel the pain? I calculated that it would take about three months.

Interesting.

The creature's toes could be rotted, dead stumps by the time its brain even got the first inkling of the accident. Obviously such a nervous system would never do in a creature so large.

So who cares? Did this little exercise of interstellar nerve impulses do me any good in the real world? As it turned out, later in the day I was wondering how quickly atoms moving on a crystalline surface (moving atoms could be just like nerve impulses, said my imagination) would interact with defects that were spaced various distances apart (where my imagination asked if these distances were more like distances from my head to my toe, or more like the distance from the head to toe of my interstellar creature). I realized very quickly that a relationship existed between scuttling atoms and defects analogous to the distances between toes and brains, and that there was a critical distance at which the atom-defect interactions no longer made sense,

just as nerve impulses hadn't made sense with my massive interstellar creature. Imagination led to a new insight.

Just as it can with you.

So enough enticements, enough benefits. Here we go back to the contest.

On all problems, there are always boundary conditions defining the areas of the problem. If you want to get rid of an anthill, certainly an imaginative solution would be the use of a nuclear bomb. But you are told that the removal of the anthill must be the most cost-effective one. This means that the nuclear bomb would not be a solution to this problem. You violated a boundary condition — a nuclear bomb costs too much money, and the bribes required to obtain one are simply outrageous. So along with the problem to be solved, I am giving you some background, several boundary conditions, and the tools at your disposal to solve this problem. This is exactly the same situation in which any scientist would find her- or himself when faced with a new problem. I want you to come up with a solution to my little problem in one hundred words or less. I will be the sole judge of this solution. Scoring will be based strictly on how imaginative I find the solution. Followed by my critiques, the top ten solutions, names, and hometowns of the winners will be printed, so be sure to include your name and address.

Stretch Your Imagination Until Your Head Explodes Contest

Background: You are at Venice Beach, California, having a picnic on the beach with Elvis Presley. As the two of you are about to attack a chocolate cheesecake, a massive bubbling and boiling occurs in the water offshore. Rising from the surf is the dreaded monster Sludgera, a self-aware, 300-foot-tall entity composed of non-biodegradable dirty disposable diapers, Styrofoam cups, and discarded Apple computers. In a sludgerous voice, Sludgera announces that its intent is to consume everyone on the beach, march inland to downtown Los Angeles, and then demand that it be given a seat on the City Council.

Problem: How can you save your life and every other life on the beach? Bonus points will be given if

you can aid in Sludgera's quest for a City Council position.

Boundary Conditions: All known laws of physics are in action — you may not violate them. Sludgera's arrival coincides with low tide. Sludgera has no known food allergies. Sludgera is not wearing sunscreen.

Tools at your Disposal: Any items found on a beach, along with the standard items that Elvis might bring on a picnic. Don't forget your imagination.

It's as simple as that. Remember that unless something is strictly forbidden, then it is allowed. Bend, fold, and mutilate my rules, but do not break them.

I should mention something to you about the story that I told you in the beginning of this column about the engineer who was trying to sell management on his new method of growing diamond films. The person who stood up in the back of the room and announced that Fujitsu is pursuing the same method of diamond growth was a liar — a plant — a shill. He was in cahoots with the speaker, both of them knowing full well that management would kill the proposal unless they thought the competition was interested in it. They bent, folded, and mutilated the system.

A word to the wise should be sufficient.

You have two months from the receipt of this issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* to send me your solution. All solutions become my sole property to print all, part, or an edited version of them in a future column. I will not return your entry, so be sure to keep a copy. Just one solution per customer, please.

Send all solutions to: Robert A. Metzger, Hughes Research Laboratories, M/S RL 61, 3011 Malibu Canyon Road, Malibu, California 90265.

Let's keep this imaginative. Good luck and have some fun. And don't let it stop here. Once you've tackled Sludgera, really let your imagination wander and see what other problems are waiting for you. Those of you who are about to stretch your imaginations until your heads explode, I salute you. □

Can't Talk About It



A writer I know once told me that he never talked about a story before it was written, because that would undermine his need to tell the story in written form. He advised me to be equally tightlipped.

Writers and artists, I have also found, are sometimes reticent to talk about projects that publishers or clients are interested in but

of biographical information, so I won't have to rely just on the skimpy *Aboriginal* "rapsheet."

Then there are the exceptions.

"E.R." by J. Brooke is set in a hospital where wondrous technology and dedicated healers must battle fiendishly clever killing devices.

Brooke is a physicist who lives in California. This story is

your business."

"E.R." is illustrated by David Deitrick. He has been doing some work for Easton Press and *Amazing Stories*, while spending most of his time preparing his master's thesis and starting the search for a tenure-track art teaching position.

Imagine the claustrophobia of living with your entire family in a



Robert Reed

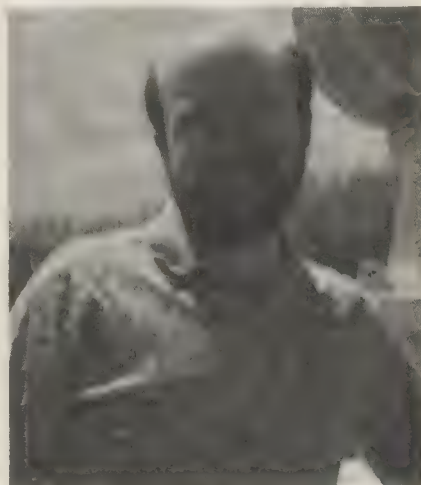
are not yet committed to.

But they are usually very glad to talk about themselves. Some will even go to the trouble of typing up three or four extra pages



B. C. Holmes

Brooke's first professional sale. There is little else I can tell you about Brooke, even whether Brooke is a he or a she, since to nearly every question on the rapsheet, the response was "None of



J. H. Ulowetz

Winnebago. Robert Reed turns such family togetherness into an alien plot in "Migration Patterns."

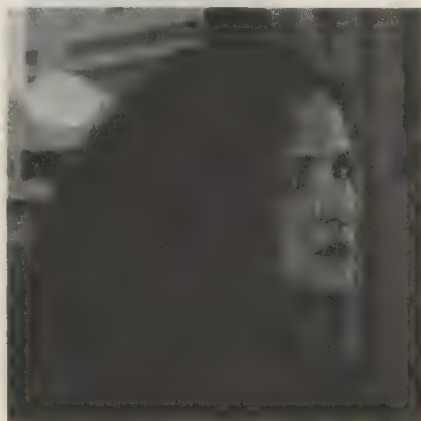
Reed, who is the author of "Aeries" (Sept.-Oct. 1987) and



Jon Foster



Cortney Skinner



Peggy Ranson



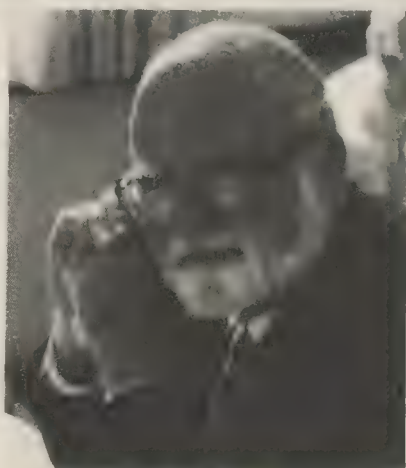
Patricia Anthony

"Goodness" (Nov.-Dec. 1988), also wrote the novel *The Remarkables*, published by Bantam last year, and is working on a book for Tor. He has published several stories recently in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*.

"Migration Patterns" is illustrated by **Jon Foster**. The Rhode Island artist is immersed in his *Neuromancer* graphic novel project these days, turning out five pages a week and hoping to finish by May.

A spaceship takes a detour to a shadowy limbo realm in "Ghosts in the Machine" by **B. C. Holmes**.

Holmes was a finalist in the Writers of the Future contest and "Ghosts" is his first professional sale. The computer programmer from Ontario is working on a film degree at York University and is



James C. Glass

getting married this summer.

"Ghosts in the Machine" is illustrated by **Cortney Skinner**, who was in the middle of completing a commissioned work when I spoke to him. It is a painting depicting Godzilla and King Kong trashing Arlington, Mass. He brought it to Boskone as a work-in-progress and it won a judges' award.

Skinner also said two publishers outside the paperback field are interested in having him do some work for them, but he can't talk about their names just yet.

There's a hero, some bad guys, a beautiful woman, and a daring chase. Sounds pretty straightforward, but there's a twist to "Must be the Heat" by **J. H. Ulowetz**.

Ulowetz says he got his start taking a writing class with **Phyllis Eisenstein** in 1989. His first short story, "An End to Darkness,"



Alexander Jablovkov

appeared in the March 1991 *Analog*. Then last July *Amazing* published his story "Journey."

He has a master's degree in astronomy and astrophysics, and has a home-built eight-inch reflector that he's using to search for faint galaxies and star clusters in a list called the *Herschel Catalog*.

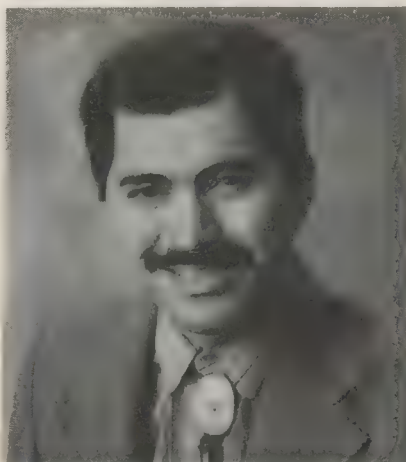
"Must be the Heat" is illustrated by **Peggy Ranson**, who was still glowing from the good times she had at New Orleans Mardi Gras when I spoke with her.

Ranson says she has been doing some art for the new magazine *Tomorrow*. In her job as a graphic artist for a New Orleans firm she is now working with the state's first riverboat gambling enterprise.

The Beatles generation reaches the nursing home stage in **Patricia Anthony's** "Born to Be



Carol Heyer



Alan Gutierrez



Larry Blamire



Greg Costikyan

Wild."

Anthony, who has written a dozen stories for *Aboriginal SF*, including "Dear Froggy" (Nos. 37-38) and "The Secret Language of Old White Ladies" (Nos. 33-34), says she just finished rewriting a novel titled *Conscience of the Beagle*, and she calls it her "most intense work so far."

She says it got to the point where she started thinking like her paranoid male protagonist even when she wasn't writing. Anthony's novel is being published by First Books this summer.

"Born to be Wild" is illustrated by **Carol Heyer**, who is finishing up her new children's book *Robin Hood*. (Readers of our last issue may recall the hunky pizza man behind it.)

She is also working on collector cards for TSR, another cover for *Amazing*, and a mystery novel cover for Dark Harvest.



Lori Deitrick



Steven M. Ford

The violent atmosphere of a hostile Jovian planet is shared by strange flying creatures and ambitious human sailors in "Regatta" by **James C. Glass**.

Glass is the author of "Jet Dancer" (Sept.-Oct.1990) and "Dezee" (No. 33-34). His short story "Georgi" was the grand prize winner of the Writers of the Future contest two years ago.

As you might expect, Glass loves sailing, and just returned from a cruise of the Grenadines in the West Indies aboard a three-masted schooner. He has just finished a novel called *Toth* and is starting to look for a publisher.

"Regatta" is illustrated by **Alan Gutierrez**. This is the fourth issue of *Aboriginal SF* in a row to feature work by this Arizona artist. He created the cover art for *Amazing's* January 1993 issue, and his next cover for that magazine will be out in March



Allison Fiona Hershey



David Deitrick

1994.

Running a household takes an advanced degree in domestic engineering in "Rest Cure" by **Alexander Jablovkov**, but the little lady in the story is up to the challenge.

Jablovkov is a Massachusetts writer with a master's degree in engineering. His novel *A Deeper Sea*, which first appeared in novella form in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, was published by Morrow/AvoNova last November. He has two more novels, *Asleep At Our Devotions* and *Nimbus*, coming out this fall.

"Rest Cure" is illustrated by **Larry Blamire**, who has just moved into bigger quarters in the Boston area. Blamire is acting in a musical tribute called "A Closer Walk with Patsy Kline" at the Charles Playhouse in Boston. It is such a hot ticket, it has been extended through the summer.



Edward James O'Connell III



Brian A. Hopkins

He and his girlfriend Dori spent a month in Australia recently. He says they saw the rain forest, snorkeled at the Great Barrier Reef, climbed Ayers Rock, even camped in the Outback and had their food stolen by dingoes. Their guide convinced them to try a new delicacy: green ants that they plucked off a tree. He says they tasted like lime because of their vitamin C content.

Race relations have not improved much in "Can a White Boy Sing the Blues?" by **Greg Costikyan**, but science has provided some new options.

Costikyan's first published short story, "They Want Our Women," appeared in *Aboriginal SF* (Sept.-Oct. 1988). His latest works include the story "Steam of the Montief and Elven" for an anthology of humorous fantasy stories edited by **Alan Dean Foster** and **Martin Greenberg**. A sequel to *Another Day, Another Dungeon*, Costikyan's first novel, is due out this year from Tor.

"Can a White Boy Sing the Blues?" is illustrated by **Lori Deitrick**, who just finished a piece for *Amazing* and has "a bunch of portraits lined up." She says she also spends a lot of time "running to the store for spare parts" to help her husband David finish his master's thesis.

When the sadistic bully in a neighborhood happens to be your brother, you could sure use an alien's help. That's the case in

"Healing Brother" by **Steven M. Ford**.

Ford made his professional debut with the story "Set a Place for Arthur" in *Aboriginal SF* (Nos. 33-34). Ford says he has joined a writer's workshop led by **Jim Brunet**, another *Aboriginal* author. He is also in the midst of remodeling his house to give himself some space in which to write.

"Healing Brother" is illustrated by **Allison Fiona Hershey**, who bounced back from surgery in January. Hershey is illustrating a Vegas-style computer game and is the supervising art director for a "really big" game project being produced by The Dreamer's Guild, due out in March.

In a future where people are marked for their communicable diseases, technologists come up with an answer for loneliness in "Dollhouse" by **Edward James O'Connell III**.

This is O'Connell's first short story sale. The graphic artist says he got his start by moving to a town where he had no friends. He says he "had to write to 'channel the voice in my head ...'" His next short story also deals with guilt, sex, and death, he says.

"Dollhouse" is illustrated by **N. Taylor Blanchard**. When I spoke to Blanchard, the New Jersey artist was getting ready for some spring conventions and "tinkering around" with his second motorcycle.

In "The Sorrows of Your Changing Face" by **Brian A. Hopkins**, a space traveler must deal with the heartache of the time paradox.

Hopkins makes a living managing "a scad of other engineers" but has been writing since the third grade. He said friends encouraged him to try to sell a few years ago and he was successful with *Dragon* magazine in 1990. Since then, he has been working on "countless short stories."

"The Sorrows of Your Changing Face" is illustrated by **Robert Pasternak**, who has his second



Robert Pasternak

Amazing Stories cover coming out in May. He also has "something exciting" in the works that he can't talk about just yet. He says in recent months he has decided to more seriously pursue certain directions in his work.

Our cover art this issue is a collaborative effort by **Carl Lundgren** and **Clyde Duensing III** called "Alien Archaeologist."

Since he last did a cover for us a few years ago, Lundgren has moved to Florida and stopped doing book covers for publishers. Instead, he has been doing Renaissance fairs and art exhibitions, where his work is seen by two million people a year, and he's been living off the sale of his prints. A book of his work is coming out in November, and he will be signing the limited edition copies.

Clyde Duensing III has a degree in graphic design and has done cover and interior work for *Dragon*, freelance work for marketing companies, and lots of car illustrations for magazines and racing teams.

He says he introduced himself to Lundgren when he heard Carl had moved to Florida, and they ended up being friends and doing some work together. He says Carl introduced him to SF conventions, and he now sees himself focusing more on what he really wants to do, which is fantasy and SF. □

Thank You, IRS



OK. OK. At this time of year, those words, those three little words in the headline for this column, are the last thing you want to hear. In fact, even mentioning that last three-letter word is enough to give most people hives.

But I mean it. In January, the IRS, in its infinite wisdom, approved the application of The 2nd Renaissance Foundation, Inc. for 501(c)(3) status as a not-for-profit educational and literary organization. And, as *Aboriginal Science Fiction* is its publication, and vehicle to promulgate awareness of scientific advancements and their place in society through a literature called "Science Fiction," this should qualify the magazine for not-for-profit postal rates.

We have filed for second- and third-class permits as a not-for-profit educational publication with the U.S. Postal Service. If approval is granted by the Postal Service, this should pave the way for a resurgence of the magazine.

While we have been publishing regularly, we had kept circulation efforts in a holding pattern, pending the decision of the IRS and Postal Service.

So, as best we can tell, *Aboriginal* will soon be in the same category as *National Geographic*, *Harper's*, and other periodicals that aim at something a little more cerebral than the Wide World of Wrestling crowd. This doesn't mean that *Aboriginal Science Fiction* is out of the woods. There is still a lot of work ahead, and a great deal which has to be done. But at least we now have a fighting chance and won't be playing against the same stacked deck.

There is, however, a whole spectrum of the science fiction community that is bemused by these activities, and many of those who are bemused have made assumptions about our shift to not-for-profit status. Some of them have assumed that the net result will be to place *Aboriginal Science Fiction* into some sort of second-class category, accessible only by dried-out English professors at state-run junior colleges.

That is not the purpose of The 2nd Renaissance Foundation, Inc. Its purpose is to promote literacy — literacy in the literal sense, and literacy in scientific matters. But also literacy in literary matters.

As I mentioned in an earlier column, for me, and the foundation, literature is not stuffy or dried out. But neither is it expedient, or a captive of the current

rage, be it cyberpunk or magic realism. We will publish stories which might fit in either of those categories. But we will also publish what might be called "space opera" and adventure fiction, as long as it is science fiction. Our goal is to get more people to read, and of those who do read, to get more to read science fiction. Our goal is also to get more people to understand science and its role in life and literature.

And, as part of our stated purpose, our goal is to help more new writers break into the field, and to publish stories which might not be publishable elsewhere because they aren't "commercial" enough.

What kind of stories will we be bringing you? How will we choose them? Well, as the editor, I belong to no political party, and you'll never find me preaching any particular philosophy, be it religious or social. One reason is that to adopt such a position is too often to die intellectually; to accept platitudes and platforms, rather than to question everything. I've never been PC (as in politically correct) and have no intention of ever becoming so. PC assumes that there is only one path — only approved forms of expression, exploration, or growth.

No matter how good the platitudes, no philosophy has an answer for every situation, or a solution for every problem, or a path for each individual.

If I were to pick an existing group which best describes my position, it would be the Libertarians. But that philosophy, too, has its shortcomings. It assumes a world of individuals, and individual rights and responsibilities. While this is partly true, we actually live in a world in which individuals are also members of groups, be they family, party, community, corporate — whatever. Our identities are tied to these groups. And our beliefs and actions are also affected by them. Far too often, our actions and philosophies become subordinate to these idea groups.

As a result, very few people are true individuals, dependent on, or obliged to, no one for sustenance or support. We are all midgets, standing on the shoulders of the giants who preceded us. And that is the only reason we have left the caves — the actual caves which we outgrew, and the caves of shadows proposed by Plato.

Last issue, I mentioned how our choices, our actions, can create new paths, or alternate realities which we

actually live. Alternate realities are a popular setting for many science fiction tales, because there are thousands of instances in our past where civilization could have taken a different turn.

Aboriginal Science Fiction's venture into the waters of not-for-profit publishing is just such an alternate reality. Anyone familiar with the state of *all* of the science fiction magazines knows that they have all been declining in circulation and readership for the past several decades. One of the main reasons for this is that they are under-financed. They are under-financed because their circulations are not large enough to attract major advertising, and hence they do not have enough revenue to attract larger circulations. This is a Catch-22 situation.

So instead of being confused or concerned about *Aboriginal's* condition and fate, I'd prefer you to view this as a new adventure, the choosing of one of Robert Frost's roads not always taken.

One of the oddest, and saddest, things I've discovered about many of the so-called visionaries in the science fiction community is that it is far easier for them to look backward than forward. It is one thing to look backward so that past mistakes aren't repeated, or to carry forward an ideal or concept that still has merit. But it is an entirely different matter to look backward because that's the only direction in which one is willing to travel.

Here at *Aboriginal Science Fiction* and The 2nd Renaissance Foundation, we plan to always look forward, and to continue down a path not worn thin by others, ready to hack our way through the jungle so that others might follow.

Oops Dept.

Last issue, when we listed all of the stories we published so you could pick nominees for the annual Boomerang Awards, we accidentally left out half of the stories from our December 1991 issue. It happened because the issue was originally scheduled to be a regular issue, but was changed to a double issue. When we went into the computer to pick the list of stories, we accidentally picked the older version, and no one caught it.

Our apologies to you, and the authors omitted. We have listed the stories elsewhere, and extended the voting deadline, so they are still eligible for the awards. □

Healing Brother

By Steven M. Ford

Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

Danny, stop. Don't touch that."
Meaty fingers with dirt-rimmed nails hovered near the wet clay.

"What? This?"

Marty clenched his teeth at the familiar snicker in his brother's voice.

"Yeah, that. Get your hands away. *Please.*"

"Make me."

I'll make you, Marty thought, but he didn't move. Instead, he watched transfixed as his older brother inched his hand closer to the brick-sized figure. He'd worked all morning to get the alien's head to match the newspaper photographs. Hours on a scalp Dad said looked like a drill head from an oil rig, with its weird bony ridges and too-low ears.

"Please, Dann —" He caught his breath. His brother's fingers were so close, a whisper would be the excuse needed for the destruction of his work.

He held still and prayed for the old Danny to come back.

A door opened downstairs. There was the soft snap of sandaled feet.

Oh no, Mom. Marty squeezed his eyes shut. *Don't.*

"Dan-nee-eee!" Mom's voice thundered up from below. "Leave your brother alone!"

Danny's hand exploded into the soft clay, sending the figure and the modeling tray tumbling to the floor.

"Aww, Mom," he called back as he casually placed his foot on the fallen tray and ground down. "I'm not doin' nothin'." He swaggered to the doorway like a schoolyard bully. "Sorry about that, *Sport*. But it was *her* fault." He continued on into the hall, his snicker expanding into a pleasure-filled laugh.

Marty squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and knelt down near his fallen things. He pulled back the tray. The wet clay was embedded in the thick carpet, and it broke into small chunks as he pulled it from the fibers.

The screen door bounced twice behind him, and Marty heard Mom call from inside.

"Dinner in three hours."

"I'm never eating again," he mumbled, and immediately felt a pang of hunger.

He kicked at a pebble as he walked down the driveway towards the sidewalk. There had to be a way to get even with his brother. Except there wasn't ... there couldn't be. Danny was always the

last to get even; besides, a nine-year-old didn't have a chance against a fourteen-year-old, especially since they'd switched Danny's medications.

He scanned the trees lining the street. He and his buddies had spent most of last summer up in the tangled branches, roaming the block like monkeys, stealing fruit from any tree within reach. He followed the thick green wall down the block and spied a commotion of flashing red lights on the corner.

"Oh wow, an accident!"

A quick hop over the neighbor's low hedge, and he was on the sidewalk running. He charged past green lawns and blacktop driveways, straining to hear the ambulance sirens. Dad's ecology company was in the office building above the crowd, and Marty knew he'd let him watch from his fourth-floor window.

He slowed to a walk as he got closer.

"Wait a minute, this ain't no accident."

Police cars and motorcycles surrounded a long black limo, all sparkling under bright camera flashes. Off to the side stood a white van pimpled with short antennas and a microwave dish towering above on its mast.

"Television!" *Danny is going to be pissed when he hears what he missed*, he thought. A smile spread on his face.

The crowd continued to grow. Several conspicuous men in dark suits and mirror-lensed sunglasses stood apart from the crowd, searching. Curly wires ran from inside their coats up into small modules behind their ears. The whole scene reminded Marty of the time Mom had dragged him and Danny down to see the President speak at the park. Danny had spent the whole time trying to make the Secret Service men jump.

An old grandmother shuffled up to the crowd. "What's all the ruckus here?"

"It's the alien," came a hissed reply.

The alien!

Marty tried to push through the wall of legs and was almost crushed as the adults near him shifted to let someone through. A little kid had no chance.

He stepped off the curb and backed out into the street to get a better look at Dad's office window; maybe he could get his attention by waving his arms. He had to be watching. The whole front of the



building was roped off, but Dad could let him in the back. He squinted and saw several forms through the tinted windows, and he recognized one of them.

"Danny!"

He waved his arms over his head, shouting his brother's name.

"Hey, kid." The gravelly male voice came from the crowd.

Marty looked over.

"Either shut up or get lost. We're trying to hear."

Marty's face flushed hot. He moved a few steps farther away and resumed his wave, silently. Finally, Danny waved back.

"Come on," he mumbled. He gestured for Danny to come down, pointing to the rear of the building.

Danny shook his head, made an exaggerated laugh, and gave him the finger, holding it close to his chest so the others near him couldn't see.

"Asshole."

"I heard that, young man," the old grandmother said.

His face flushed again.

The crowd fell silent. He perched on his tiptoes and cocked his head. Someone was speaking.

"Kro'zaar, is it true that you cured one of your bodyguards of cancer?" shouted a strong-voiced woman. Her voice was familiar. TV?

"I assist humans with effort."

A chill went through Marty as Kro'zaar's voice rolled through him. It sounded as if it had been spoken with a cello.

"What about Congress? What if they refuse to help your people?"

A low hum filled the air. Sadness. Marty thought of his ruined sculpture. The hum continued, gradually becoming words. "Others have been located. We will travel to them."

Don't leave.

Marty remembered the red-faced, fist-pounding congressman on TV. *No one's environmental problems come before ours. No one's.* Marty shivered; the congressman had looked mean enough to hop out of the set, especially when he called Kro'zaar a pimple-headed beggar. Dad had just laughed and explained that it was greed and fear talking. *The United States will share, son. We always do.*

A couple of squirrels were playing a noisy game of tag in the tree overhead, and Marty realized he knew the perfect vantage point.

He ran past the rear of the office building to where Brian McFin's back wall bordered the parking lot, stepped on a car bumper, and hitched himself up to the top of the wall. He walked quickly down its brick cap to the huge tree at the end. The heavy branches sat right on the wall, and he stepped easily into the shadow space.

He took careful steps using the fattest branches

he could find, easing his weight slowly onto each branch to hide any movement. He stealthily crossed through the trees, taking extra care in the last one because of the ants and their wet trails. He sneaked through it as far as he dared and gingerly bent a small branch out of the way to give himself a view.

It was him, the alien ... Kro'zaar!

Marty trembled with excitement. He looked just like he had on the news.

And in my model.

In many ways he looked human: two arms and two legs, slightly taller than his human escorts, he looked like a school principal in his dark blue business suit. Not too human though. His bumpy hospital-white head looked like some sort of ill-fitting plastic skullcap from a magic store. His sunglasses, strapped tightly to his head, were like the kind old people wore.

"Wow," Marty whispered. He wanted to jump down and talk to him. He had so many questions.

He brushed at some ants crawling on his hand and then quickly drew back when one of the suited men pointed up towards his tree. He swatted at an angry buzz near his ear, and his hand exploded in pain. A bee wiggled in his palm like a dog with its tail buried in the sand.

He shook it off, letting a low moan escape. His foot began to slip on the slick bark, and he clutched at the branches.

"Everyone down!" came a shout from below.

He heard the shouts, but their significance didn't register; he just knew he was about to fall and his hand felt like it had been slammed in a car door.

There were two loud pops and a raging heat in the side of his leg, which crumbled beneath him. He fell forward. The thin branches he clung to slipped through his fingers, leaving him with only a handful of leaves. His stomach struck a branch, knocking the wind out of him.

Another pop from below, an immediate, tearing pain in his neck, and then ... *blackness.*

The salty smell of a familiar cologne woke him up, but it was the soft aroma of Grandpa's pipe that made him open his eyes. Grandpa smiled down from his easy chair.

"Come on, boy, I'll tell you a tale."

"Oh, Grandpa, I've missed you." Marty crawled up into his lap. He was five again, surrounded by the cozy heat of his Grandpa's hug.

"But, Grandpa, you're —"

"Shh, boy." He took a deep draw on his pipe. "Remember the Swami I told you about? The one who could stop himself from bleeding and make his wounds disappear?" Smoky puffs rose upward, blurring his features.

Marty nodded. Grandpa's face faded into an indistinct blur, but just as he realized this it solidified

again, and Marty relaxed in another warm hug.

"I'm going to show you how to do it."

"Whatever you want, Grandpa." Marty leaned back, content.

A tickle in his head and ... he remembered. He must've known how to do it all along! And it was easy.

"Now I want you to try it." Another puff and a thick cloud of obscuring smoke. "First your neck."

An image of his torn neck appeared in Marty's mind, and he pushed at it, just like Grandpa had shown him. It began to close.

"You got it, boy. Keep at it."

Marty concentrated on the wound. The heat in his neck diminished. He was almost done.

"Marty?"

"Yeah, Grandpa?" He opened his eyes. The white clouds of pipe smoke had solidified and somehow twisted Grandpa's face into that of the alien. Kro'zaar's face was close. His sunglasses were pulled up, and his small eyes glowed brightly. His breath had the rich smell of fresh-dug soil. A flicker in his eyes, like a brief smile, and he dropped the sunglasses back down and stood up.

"Look at that, he healed the boy!"

Voices rose around him. Marty could taste the excitement in the crowd. Grandpa's voice softly cut through. "Don't forget your leg, boy."

Marty ran a dry tongue over his lips. "Yeah, my leg."

He pushed at the throbbing in his calf. It seemed easier, the wound closed quickly, but he was getting tired. He yawned as the murmuring crowd faded into a hypnotic buzz.

The model plane looked tiny against the open expanse of the empty parking lot. It was fueled up, and its glistening wings waited impatiently for the chance to soar in the warm morning sunglow.

Marty sat on the rough asphalt, elbows on his knees and chin in his hands, looking at the gift from Stan Scheerer, the Secret Serviceman who'd shot him. Stan was supposed to be here to show Marty how to use it, but the doctors had kept Marty under observation in the hospital too long, and now he was off somewhere with Kro'zaar.

Dad looked up at Marty from where he and Danny hovered over the remote control. "Don't worry, son. We'll have this thing figured out in no time."

Danny pushed his father. "Dad, I tell ya I've flown these before with my friends. Now you go get it running and I'll take it off. When it's in the air I'll show the kid how to control it."

Dad looked quizzically at Marty. Marty looked away. He hated the way his parents tiptoed around Danny because of his problem. As soon as it got tough Dad usually got away by going into work, but not today.

Healing Brother

Dad shrugged and walked over to the plane. He squatted down and started the engine. It puffed white smoke and whined loudly.

"Dad, don't be a jerk. Let go of it."

Dad released the plane, but stayed down, staring hard at the ground.

The little plane rolled forward, picking up speed. Its wings flashed as it bounced over tiny pebbles and cracks. It took to the air, had a close call with the ground in a sudden dip, and began climbing high overhead in a series of long spirals. Marty watched as its flight path flattened and Danny expertly flew it in a series of barrel rolls and loops.

Yeah, I want to do that. Marty stood up and started over towards Danny.

"Hold it there a minute, *Sport.*" Danny had turned to face him, holding the remote control like a shield.

Marty's shoulders slumped. *Not again.* He knew that glint in his brother's eye. The little plane buzzed angrily behind him, and he felt a gust of air as its wings passed near his head.

Danny's gaze darted to the sky and back to Marty. He touched the control and smiled.

Marty hated that smile. He walked towards Danny, who stepped back while continuing to fiddle with the control. He looked up, his smile wide.

There was a sudden pounding of his father's footsteps as he ran towards them. "Danny! Marty — look out!"

Marty began another step towards Danny, and the insect-like buzzing of the plane suddenly became an ear-piercing scream. The airplane slammed into the side of his face, knocking him to his knees. The little propeller burrowed in like a drill. Blinded by lightning bolts of pain, Marty tried to push himself up, but there seemed to be slippery blood everywhere.

Grandpa's smiling face appeared in his mind. He winked. "You know what to do." Marty pushed at the wound, just like before, and the pain diminished.

He felt hands on his shoulders. "Lie down, son, and let me get a look at this. Danny! Put that control down!"

He pushed again. The fire in his face became a dull throb. Grandpa faded.

"Hmm. Sure looks like a lot of blood." Marty tensed as Dad's fingers probed his face and hair, but it didn't hurt. "That's funny, I can't even find the cut."

Danny strolled up. "Gee, Dad, I'm sorry. But he did it to himself. If he hadn't started to run at me, the plane would have missed him by a million miles."

"I'll talk to you later, young man."

A wave of exhaustion washed through Marty, and he sighed. "Dad, I'm not feeling too well. Is it all right if we go home? We can play with the plane

later." The drying blood on his face felt like caked mud.

Dad squeezed his shoulder. "Sure, son." He picked up the broken remains of the plane. "It looks like it'll be a while before your brother saves enough to replace this."

Danny grimaced. "Wait a minute, that's not fair!"

Dad shot Danny a dark look, but Danny continued, "It's his fault, Dad, he walked into it."

Dad turned to Marty, his face red with anger. "You go wait in the car. I'm going to have a little discussion with your brother."

Marty smiled as he walked back.

Danny returned to the car grim-faced. He leaned close to Marty as he climbed in. "You're going to pay for this, Sport."

When they got home Mom gave Dad a mean look. She made Marty sit on the kitchen counter while she fussed over him with exaggerated concern and complained about the blood stains.

He endured her poking and prodding for as long as possible before hopping off the counter. "Thanks, Mom. Can I go now?"

She stepped back and looked at him. "Mmm, I suppose." Her gaze flicked briefly up to the liquor cabinet, and Marty's stomach twisted when she licked her lips. She looked around the room and whispered, "Your brother can't help it, you know. It's that brain lesion."

Marty nodded. Danny's brain lesion was an excuse for everything he did.

She held his shoulders and gave him a wet kiss on the forehead.

"Maw-om."

She stroked his hair. "Try to keep out of his way."

"Believe me, I will."

He took the stairs two at a time on his way to his room.

Danny was sitting on the bed. Marty hesitated at first, but went in anyway. It was his room.

"Hi, Sport." Danny shifted, holding his left arm behind his back.

"Get out of my room."

"Make me." Danny thrust out his chin. Around his feet were the shattered remains of several of Marty's sculptures.

A roaring filled Marty's head, and he charged over to Danny. "Get out, NOW!"

"Make me. Make me. Make me."

As Marty reached down to pull him off his bed, Danny grabbed him by the wrist. Marty tugged and tried to back away.

"Let go, asshole!"

Danny smiled. He brought a long, jagged piece of broken sculpture from behind his back and pressed it against Marty's exposed arm. "Don't move or

you'll be sor-r-ry." His voice had a taunting sing-song quality.

Marty pulled back. Immediately Danny drew the razor-sharp shard down, slicing a thin red line along his arm.

"Aahh."

"Uh-oh, look what you made me do." Danny licked his lips as he watched the thin trickle of blood run down Marty's arm.

Push, son. He heard the voice in his head and Marty pushed. The wound closed and faded away.

"I thought so." A grin spread across Danny's face. "Oh boy, am I going to have fun."

"I'm going to tell Mom."

"She won't believe you. You'll be healed before she's had a chance to see it. Besides, she'll be too drunk to focus."

Danny shifted his grip on the piece and brought its sharp point against the fleshy part of Marty's forearm, letting the tip just prick the skin.

"No!" Marty struggled with renewed vigor. He kicked Danny and grabbed at his hair.

"Ouch!"

Marty pulled free and ran towards the door.

Danny flashed the piece like a knife. "You'd better not tell Mom." He laughed. "Or I just might come visit you while you're sleeping."

Marty ran down the stairs. He looked at his arm. Smooth skin. The cut was nothing but a memory. Mom hummed a tune as she worked in the kitchen. Ice cubes tinkled as she sipped from her glass. Danny was right, she wouldn't believe him.

He sighed. "Mom, I'm going to ride my bike."

"Okay, but please be careful. It seems like you've been a little accident-prone lately."

Yeah.

He sailed down the block on the bike. The air chilled his skin as it washed across his hands and face. He was safe here.

Danny hadn't always been his personal torturer. Marty could remember when Danny had been his best friend in the whole world ... before the accident. Mom hadn't seen the other car, probably because she'd had one too many, and Danny hadn't been wearing his seatbelt ... and now they'd changed his medication and started him at a new junior high.

He made a slow U-turn at the end of the block. The sidewalk was still stained where he'd been shot. He brought his hand up to the part of his face that had been torn up by the airplane. There wasn't even a scar. He shook his head. He still couldn't believe he'd learned to heal from an alien.

He smiled. Kro'zaar wanted to hire Dad's ecology company! That was why he was there the day Marty was shot. Dad'd said the problems on Kro'zaar's planet were pretty bad and that we should help him, but no one else agreed, not even Mom.

Marty sighed.

Last night she'd been talking back at the TV again, agreeing loudly with the commentator who'd said it would be corporate greed, not good will, if we helped Kro'zaar, because the technology exchange would give Dad's company an unfair advantage.

"Yeah," she'd said. Eyes aglow. "Yeah."

Dad never said a word. He just stared at her, shook his head, and left. She swore, poured herself another drink, and changed the channel to a game show.

Marty blinked several times and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. The wind chilled the moisture around his eyes.

He was concentrating on the twist he felt when he thought about Mom, when he heard a noise: a swift buzzing like the backward spin of a bicycle's gears.

He looked up. Danny was on his bike, bearing down on him at a right angle from a driveway. He stared, glassy-eyed, at a spot near Marty's legs.

Marty searched for somewhere to turn, to get out of the way, but his brother was too close.

Danny stood up on the pedals, gaining more speed. The tendons pulsed in his neck as he pulled on the handles.

Marty fumbled for the handbrakes.

"Better watch where you're going, *Sport*, you might get hurt."

Danny hopped off his bike a second before it slammed broadside into Marty's.

The front wheel smashed into his leg as he brought his arms over his head. The ground rushed at him. There was a sharp crunch as his right arm took the brunt of the fall.

"There, that's for all the kids at school who want to meet you."

Marty managed a short peep before he lost consciousness.

When he came to, Danny was nowhere around. His clothes were dirty and torn, the front wheel of his bike was bent where he fell on it, he was exhausted, but he felt fine.

Jeez, it even works when I'm asleep, he thought as he dragged his bike back home.

Marty quit pacing and threw himself on his bed. Dad was in Washington, testifying before Congress, and Mom was no help at all. Whenever he saw her she was on the phone, or going shopping, or having another drink

Danny had become brazen, no longer confining his assaults to Marty's room or outside.

It seemed his sole goal in life was to inflict pain. He'd become adept with pliers, razor blades, nails ... anything else that caught his fancy. Marty shuddered at the memory of being caught in the kitchen.

The cuts and bruises disappeared as fast as they

formed. He didn't think about healing anymore; it was automatic, but the pain, he could always remember the pain.

He drowsed a little, praying that Dad would come back early. He was hungry, but he wasn't leaving his room for a snack. Danny would be there.

"Maarr-ty, telephone." His mother's muffled voice was faint through the door. He pushed himself off his bed and pulled away the chair he'd propped under the door handle. Danny's door was closed, and he let out a sigh as he walked by.

He stared at the handset. "Who is it?"

"Why don't you say hello and find out."

He shrugged. "Hello."

"Hi, Marty, this is Stan Scheerer. How are you?"

"All right."

"Your dad told me about the airplane, and I'm going to see about getting you a new one. Look, I've got a friend with me, and we'd like to come out and talk to you. Is that okay?"

Marty was waiting in front of his house like Stan told him when the black limousine pulled up to the curb. The door opened, and Stan stepped partway out of the car and waved Marty in. Marty looked both ways to see if he was being watched and then darted to the car, ducking into the dark cavern offered by the open door. He sat down next to Kro'zaar.

"Good morning, Martin human." The words sounded as if they were being blown across a half-filled bottle.

Holy shit!

The car door slammed, and he jumped. He pressed his hands together to stop their shaking and looked up at Kro'zaar. Tiny eyes peered out of plastic smooth, white, poreless flesh that couldn't be skin. There were long razor ridges wherever two plates of

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his porcelain shell-skin met and overlapped.

Marty looked over to Stan, who sat on the dark leather seat across from them. The Secret Service agent nodded reassuringly.

Marty turned to Kro'zaar. "Huh, good morning."

Stan signaled the driver. The car lurched as it pulled onto the street, pressing Marty against Kro'zaar's side. Like his head, the body under his gray pinstriped suit was rock hard, devoid of any cushioning layer of fat.

"There is a problem with your sibling."

"Huh?"

"Your brother," Stan said.

Marty brought a hand to his cheek and remembered the angry buzz of the model plane. He looked away. "He hurts me."

Stan looked over to Kro'zaar. "We know."

"There is a further problem, young human." Kro'zaar brought his hand up and tickled his pale forehead with long bony fingers. "I must leave soon, and our linkage will fade. Can you defend yourself against further aggression?"

Marty's mouth sagged. "You mean I haven't been doing it on my own?"

"In the few worlds my race has contacted, none has yet learned ... the technique." Kro'zaar's gaze intensified.

Suddenly words welled up in Marty's mind. *I have been assisting you.*

Marty shook his head and stared back at Kro'zaar. *Can you hear me?*

Kro'zaar nodded.

"Wow."

"Your voice is weak, but your pain screams through my being like the winds through the Karaknar." He looked down at Stan. "This soft-fleshed one will not survive an assault by his sibling once I have gone." He reached out and laid a skeletal hand on Marty's head. "Yet I must go. My people are waiting." Kro'zaar sighed. "I'm sorry, Martin human. I have no choice, the window of my exit has come."

"When are you going to leave?"

"Tomorrow." *You will then be on your own.*

His brother's gleeful smile and the flash of a knitting needle held like a dagger flickered through his mind.

Marty shivered.

Simultaneously Kro'zaar shivered too. "Your imaginations, your nightmares. How hard you humans make it for me."

"Can't you heal him?" He thought of a time when he and Danny had spent a morning being chased and tickled by Grandpa.

"He must want to be healed." Kro'zaar looked out the window. "Presently he is enjoying his power."

Stan signaled the limo driver and shoved a business card into Marty's hand. "If your brother gives

you any flak, call that number. Ask for Mr. Spaceman. They'll patch you through to me. I'll do whatever I can to help." He squeezed Marty's shoulder. "Another thing, son. Don't tell anyone about this problem. Bad publicity could jeopardize Kro'zaar and his people." He opened the door.

Marty nodded, but paused halfway out the door, a bubble of hope forming inside. "Take me with you."

"I'm sorry, Martin human. That is not possible."

Marty nodded and got out of the car. He was a block from his house, under the tree that had gotten him into this mess in the first place. The door slammed and the car sped off.

Goodbye, young human.

When he got back up to his room, Danny was waiting.

I watched you ride off with that alien. What are you doing? Helping it invade the Earth?" Danny strode around the room, his head twisting and turning, searching. He neared the desk and flung his arm out, knocking over a can full of pens and pencils. They slid off the desk like a barrage of arrows. He looked back at Marty with a challenge and snapped a plastic pen in two with his foot.

He homed in on the bookcase, and Marty jumped protectively in front of it, guarding his figures inside.

"I know, I bet they're all homos and you're just joining the party."

Marty swung his fist. He encapsulated in the punch every ounce of rage and hate and anger in him. It bounced off his brother's chest.

"Well, *Sport*, you started it." Danny's smile was grim. He flexed his fingers.

"No!" Marty dodged around him and fled from the room. The sound of crashing books followed him as he ran down the stairs.

Marty squeezed the misshapen form back into a lopsided ball and cut into the clay with his sharpened knife. "Damn Danny," he muttered, and poked at the clay again with the knife-point. "Damn him." He sat on the edge of his bed, his desk chair wedged under the doorknob.

Despite the chair, the door vibrated with the violent pounding of music videos blaring from the downstairs television. Mom was out grocery shopping. Danny was home. The thumping faded into a hamburger commercial, and Marty stabbed again at the clay ball. Danny roamed the house like a hungry pit bull.

He stabbed at the clay. His room was his prison. The only TV he'd seen in three days had been during dinner, when Mom made Danny switch the channel to the news.

It was then he had learned Kro'zaar had left. During dinner the night before, when Mom briefly

took control of the TV. He saw Kro'zaar, on the screen, dressed in a suit as bright as his skin, entering his small ship. The newscaster's comments droned on as the slow-motion camera showed the ship entering the wormhole. His heart lurched when the ship shrank to a point in a split second. He lost his appetite when the words "recorded earlier" popped up on the screen. Kro'zaar had been gone for hours and he'd never felt the loss.

Could he avoid Danny until Dad got back? He'd stayed clear of Danny for a day, but could he do it for the rest of the week?

Suddenly the doorknob rattled, and the chair creaked. "Come on, *Sport*, let me in. I'm not gonna hurt you."

"GO AWAY!"

"Make me."

The door bounced several times, but he'd been careful when he wedged the chair, and it held.

He felt something slippery in his hand and looked down. Blood! *Damn*. He'd cut himself with the knife. He hadn't even felt it!

He clamped his other hand around his wrist and relaxed his fingers. He needed a bandage. He stood up, holding his hand high. A thin stream of blood trickled down his arm and then stopped. He looked back at his hand. The wound was closing, healing.

I did it myself!

He plopped back onto the bed, looking at his hand. He could feel a small part of him pushing at the wound. It was like noticing he was breathing. The cut was gone a moment later. Dizzy with relief, he looked around the room. Danny couldn't hurt him, at least not permanently.

He'd learned to do something Kro'zaar had said no other race could do. Heal. He was as good as Kro'zaar ... even better, because Kro'zaar hadn't known Marty had learned.

His gaze fell on the baseball bat he kept by the bed in case the chair didn't hold. He had an idea.

Tonight.

The bat was bathed in thin ribbons of moonlight shining through his shuttered windows. Its long neck was smooth and solid in his hands.

Two hours had passed since Mom had turned off the TV and begged Danny to go to bed. While he waited, Marty had tested his healing with a razor blade. It worked every time. He smiled. Danny had given him lots of practice.

He cocked his head, listening. Silence.

It was time to help Danny.

The hall was dark. It seemed so easy. Marty walked down the shadowy aisle, the soft soles of his shoes whispering on the carpet. Light shone under Mom's door, but she'd been drinking. She'd never hear. Danny's door was ajar. Marty smiled grimly. *Of course, you've got no one to hide from.*

Danny was in bed. The blankets moved rhythmically up and down, accompanied by a faint wheeze in his brother's breathing. Marty caressed the bat. He rested his thighs against the bed and raised the bat high over his head.

Danny slept.

I'm not afraid.

The only way to help Danny was to rebuild him. But first Danny needed a reason. He had to want to be healed.

He raised the bat higher, squeezing it hard.

Do it, he screamed inside.

He hesitated. He could feel his arms trembling. The bat began to feel heavy, weighted. His mind began to thrash. What if it doesn't work?

There was a grunt from the bed. He looked down; his knees were shaking the bed.

"Huh?" groaned Danny.

The bat felt like it was filled with lead.

"Is that you, *Sport*?"

"Yeah, it's me."

Danny reached out and touched him on the leg.

Marty pulled the bat down. It whistled through the air and hit with a sickening crunch. Danny's hand went limp. Marty pulled the bat back. It was wet.

As quickly as he could he knelt and took Danny's limp hand. He didn't know how much time he had. In his mind he built a picture of Grandpa, wooden pipe and all.

Was this the way to do it?

He imagined Danny before him, his face splashed with red. He made Grandpa speak, silently mouth-ing the words: "Come up in my lap, Danny me boy. I'd like to tell you a story —"

Blinding light flared in the room.

"My God, Martin, what have you done?"

Mom pulled him away from Danny. The image of Grandpa vanished from his mind.

"Mom, don't. I've got to help him."

Marty looked over to Danny. The sheets were splashed with blood.

Oh, Danny.

He was running out of time. He jerked out of her grasp and waved the bat threateningly.

"Get out, Mom. I've got to help him."

She stepped back as he advanced. "My God, what have I let happen?" She crumpled to the floor just outside the door, hugged her knees to her head, and shook.

Marty closed the door and dropped the bat. He'd have to figure out a way to help her, too. Later, after Danny. He went back to his brother's bed and took his hand.

Danny? This is Grandpa. Remember that Swami ... □

Ghosts in the Machine

By B.C. Holmes

Art by Cortney Skinner

Carolyn was vomiting on the navigation console. My instruments were screaming at me, and I could hear the engineer shouting something over the intercom.

Somewhere in the pit of my stomach, I could feel the ship tumbling, although the instruments claimed that internal gravity was stable. The smell of fresh vomit didn't help much, either.

After the feeling subsided a bit, I unbuckled myself and tried to help Carolyn. I pulled some paper towels out of the supplies locker and pushed the vomit off of the main display area. Carolyn looked up at me with humiliation in her eyes.

"What happened?" she said. "Did something shoot us?"

"Bad entry into hyper-space," I said. "Misjump."

"Oh, God. It's my fault," she said.

"There are lots of causes for misjumps. In fact, statistically speaking, very few are caused by navigational errors." I didn't know statistics from spit, but too many friends of mine had been chewed out by Captains during a misjump. I had no intention of looking like that kind of tyrant.

Debbie was at the door. "Mac, the passengers are asking what's happened. What should I tell them?"

The problem was that some ships never come back after a misjump. I didn't need that kind of fear in my passengers. "Tell them we hit some interference during the shift to hyper-space. Make it seem like we've got everything in hand. I don't want any panicking, Deb. I'm counting on you."

"Okay, boss. Can I tell them that you'll be up to speak to them in an hour or so?"

"Yeah, yeah. Go to it. And can you send Ruth up here? Our navigator has lost her lunch on the control panel."

"Sure," said Debbie.

"That's the thing about you, Captain," Carolyn said, still mopping at the mess on the console. "You can be so sensitive sometimes."

I poked my head into Ruth's cabin, bearing coffee. "So," I said, "are we going to get sued?"

"What? The passengers?" she said. "They're fine. A couple of cases of nausea, but that's to be expected." She powered up the medical database.

"Okay, I was just checking." I made my way out.

"Sit," she said.

"Doctor, I don't have time for this ..."

"Shut up and answer my questions. Are you feeling any ill effects?"

"I don't know ... some motion sickness, I guess. I can feel the ship tumbling"

"Are we tumbling?"

"Can't tell. You look outside, it's all the uniform gray of hyper-space. Besides, with internal gravity, we wouldn't be able to feel it anyway."

"Hmm ..." she said, and touched a few spots on her screen. "That's common in cases of misjump sickness. Any other symptoms?"

"Naw." I sat there a moment. "But do you have anything for chronic horniness?"

She looked up from her screen, frowning in a disapproving manner. "Is this about Carolyn?"

"Ruth, that kid has no sense of modesty. Have you seen how she dresses?"

"That kid' is twenty-five and has her navigation certificate."

"I know. But if she doesn't stop, I'm going to die."

"Here, take this," she said, passing me a small capsule.

I eyed it suspiciously. "What is it?" I asked.

"Estrogen."

I threw it at her.

"Did you check out our engineer?" I asked.

"Yes, Linda's fine. I also looked in on our frozen passengers, and they're all fine."

"Run that one by me again, Doctor?"

"I checked out the cold-berths. As far as I can tell, the misjump hasn't affected any of the frozen passengers."

I looked at her for a long time. "Ruth, we don't have any frozen passengers."

"Sure we do. I'm always present when they're put in. Remember the woman with the kids that just wouldn't shut up?"

"Ruth, that was the last run. We dropped her and her little darlings off in the Epsilon Indi system."

She brought her hand to her mouth, and her eyes widened. "My God, you're right."

"Age, Ruthie. It starts to hit us all."

"But Mac, I was down there. There were people."

I called a crew meeting just after dinner, and we were waiting for Deb to arrive. I was watching Carolyn as she sat on the edge of the dining table



kicking her legs back and forth like an impatient six-year-old.

I looked up when Debbie entered and noticed that Ruth was frowning at me again.

"Sorry I'm late," Deb said.

"No problem," I said, then addressed the group.

"Okay, what have we got?"

"I've double-checked the Nav input, and everything's in line," said Carolyn.

Linda added, "Everything appears to be okay with the drive unit, but I suspect that if we have a damaged phase coil, we might not be able to tell." She had these two points written down on her notepad, and she put a check-mark beside them as she spoke. Linda worries me sometimes.

"How might we find out for sure?" I asked.

"I'll have to rip up the floorboards and take a look. Might take me an hour or two."

"Okay, do it. Ruth, you said the passengers were fine, medically speaking, right?"

"Yup."

Debbie added, "I think they're handling everything fairly well. I think they're oblivious to the seriousness of the situation. Eventually, though, we will have to tell them something. I think we should also do a check on the cargo, to see if anything there was affected."

"Good idea," I said, "Can you handle that?"

"I don't think I should be away from the passengers for an extended period of time. They're bound to get antsy."

"Fine, I'll do it."

When I arrived in the cargo hold, it was dark and the air was stale; I try to cut my expenses wherever I can. "Lights," I said. The light panels in the ceiling winked on, one at a time, in a quick and regular pattern.

The closest boxes were simple plastic cubes. I hit a button on the side of one and called up a manifest. Apparently the box contained Phars, Pl Bsed, Gnl ava, non-p, red circle around water drop, green triangle, red X through green leaf, red circle around yellow radiation symbol, red circle with black center, blue thermometer, green thermometer, yellow thermometer, and big purple arrow pointing "This end up."

There was a scuffing noise behind a row of crates, near the back.

"Hello?" I said.

No response.

I slid through a makeshift passageway around the boxes. Somebody dropped something. I heard it. I leaped at the space behind the crates, and there was nothing there.

I was about to head back when something caught my eye. Someone had left a pair of red pressure-suit gloves on one of the crates. They looked much bigger

than Debbie's hands.

I stood in the doorway to Ruth's cabin, leaning against the doorframe. I scratched my head.

"Yes?" said Ruth.

"Do you have a minute?" I asked her.

"Sure," she said. She turned on the cabin terminal. The medical database.

"You said that spinning sensation was a symptom of Misjump sickness. What other symptoms are there?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Please, Ruth, just answer my question."

"Nausea, vomiting, dizziness. Over the long term, hallucinations, depression ..." She paused. "Paranoia."

"Hallucinations," I said. "Like your frozen passengers."

"Linda says she feels like someone is watching her."

I sighed. "Are we all going to crack up?"

"I don't know."

Here it is," said Linda. "Our phase coil. Not in the best of shape."

"Dammit, we just had all that stuff safety-checked."

"Well, they didn't do a very good job."

"I am going to sue somebody big-time, let me tell you."

Linda looked uncomfortable. "Mac, we can't repair it. We don't have the necessary equipment." She paused, then: "The phase coil is vital for controlling the transition between hyper-space and real-space."

"So in a nutshell, we're stuck here."

She nodded her head gravely. "We're stuck here."

Carolyn, come in here," I shouted. The door behind me irised open, and our navigator poked her head in.

"What's up, Boss?" she said.

I was standing on the pilot console peering out through the viewport. "I saw a ship. Turn on the sensors. See if you can get a fix."

She looked at me unbelievably. "In hyper-space?" she asked.

"Yes. I just caught a glimpse of it out the viewport. See if you can find it with the sensors."

She slipped into her acceleration couch and powered up the sensor board. She muttered, "Never heard of two ships meeting in hyper-space before."

"What?" I said. "Do you think I've made all this up? I'm telling you I saw a ship."

"I get nothing for graviton emissions. No neutrinos or other beta particles. No EMS-band radiations. Nothing on any sensor."

"Are you sure? Have you done a diagnostic on the

scanners?"

"There's nothing there," she said.

I flicked the intercom switch: "Linda, can you please come to the bridge?"

Linda arrived a few minutes later and halted in the doorframe. She took in the scene. Me, crouching on the pilot's console with Carolyn hunched over navigation, pouting, two or three feet below me.

"Is this your latest trick to check out Carolyn's cleavage?" she asked.

I gave her the finger and said, "I want a complete diagnostic on the sensors."

"Could I ask why?" she asked.

"He thinks he saw a ship, and we can't get a reading on it," Carolyn offered.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with the sensors," Linda said.

"Have you checked?" I barked at her.

"No, Captain," she replied in a perfectly controlled voice. "But we didn't have any problems with them when we left the Epsilon Indi system, and, frankly, I doubt that we've encountered another ship in hyper-space. The odds are astronomical."

"But I saw it!" I was livid. Carolyn looked down at her console, unwilling to meet my gaze.

"If it's any consolation, Captain," Linda said, "maybe a ship is out there. But our scanners are designed with normal three-dimensional space in mind. We're in hyper-space. Who says that a neutrino in hyper-space is going to travel in a straight line between them and us? And if it doesn't, we don't pick it up."

"So even if it is out there," she continued, "we can't send them a message. Hyper-space is all twisted up. We have no guarantee that a radio beam is going to reach them."

"We could send someone out in a pressure suit," I offered.

"Captain," Linda said, "you're not thinking clearly. Three-dimensional objects cannot survive in hyper-space. This ship is protected by a phase envelope, but as soon as you tried to step outside the envelope, then zing, you would cease to exist."

"There has to be something we can do to reach them ..."

Linda looked at me severely. Linda was one of the most articulate people that I'd ever met, but that look was far more convincing than any argument she could have presented. I was no longer rational. How long was it going to be before one of us did something unforgivable?

Carolyn screamed. I threw my covers aside and grabbed my bathrobe.

By the time I arrived at Carolyn and Linda's room, everything had settled down. Ruth was comforting Carolyn, trying to get her to go back to sleep.

"What happened?" I asked.

Ghosts in the Machine

Linda answered, "She says that she saw someone at the foot of her bed."

"Hmph," I said. "Linda, can I see you in my quarters for a moment?"

She followed me across the hall and into my quarters. I sat down at my desk and looked at her for a long moment. "Linda, how much fuel does the ship have left?"

"We can go for about a month, maybe a bit more."

"What'll happen when we run out?"

Her answer came immediately; she had already been asking herself these same questions. "The Phase Envelope will collapse, and the ship will cease to exist. I think it'll be fairly painless."

I let out a sigh, a bit louder than I really wanted to. "In a month's time, there won't be a sane person on this ship."

"I know," she said. I sensed that she knew what I was thinking.

Suddenly, I snickered.

"What's so funny?" she said.

"You have teddy bears on your pajamas," I said.

I was up talking with the passengers early the next morning. Debbie insisted that I be open and positive, but that I not build false hopes. She told me to keep everything in perspective, but not to reveal the whole truth yet. Be clear, concise, and candid. Don't be depressing, and don't try to be funny. Don't look nervous or evasive. Blah Blah Blah Blah Blah.

We chatted briefly in the passenger galley.

"Mac," she said, "do you believe in ghosts?"

"No," I said. "No, I guess. Not really."

"Captain, the passengers have been telling strange stories. People walking around at night. Unexplained noises. Somebody told me that he heard whispering in his cabin all night long."

"People are getting jumpy. It'll pass," I said.

"Mac, last night I got up because I heard talking in the galley. There were four people eating a meal at the main table. And Mac, it wasn't our galley. The fixtures were all wrong. The appliances were arranged differently. I can't explain it. And while I was standing there watching it all, it just disappeared. I tell you it was one of the scariest things that I ever saw in my life."

"Ruth says —"

"Mac, this wasn't in my head. I saw these people."

"I know. I've had a number of those happen to me." I shook my head. "Debbie, I've got to talk to you about something. The whole ship is cracking up. We have enough power and supplies to survive a whole month in hyper-space, but none of us is going to remain sane that long. Linda can turn off the phase envelope at any time. It's the same way of dying, but we get to go when we're sane."

Debbie looked away from me suddenly. "So that's

it, then? There's no way we can get out of this?"

I shook my head.

"Well, I would advise against telling the pah ... pah ..." Her whole body started to shake. I held on to her, and she broke down. She cried into my shoulder for a good twenty minutes. She claims that I cried too, but she can't prove it.

Carolyn and I were on the bridge, checking our position for the millionth time. I recorded some readings in the paper log, then I turned to the environmental controls. Carolyn was watching me, not sure what I was up to.

I touched the switch that engages the inertial compensators. Nothing happened. I touched it again.

"The instruments say the gravity's OK," she said.

"I know," I said. I got up and walked around the bridge for a bit. "Don't you feel that?" I asked.

She looked up at me. "Feel what?"

"Nothing," I said. I inventoried the fire extinguishers and the emergency stickum hull patches. I looked back at the panel. I touched the "engage" button. Nothing happened.

"You okay?" Carolyn asked.

"This ship is tumbling," I said. "It's driving me —" I stopped. "I'm going to take a walk."

The door irised open in front of me, and I walked out. I headed back for my cabin, and I got lost. I mean, I say I got lost, but I didn't really, because, let's face it, I've owned the ship for almost twenty years, and I've refitted about half the parts in her, and I know every centimeter of every corridor on board. But at some point I stopped recognizing things. A man in a gray coverall was about ten meters ahead of me, and he was turning a corner.

"Hey, you," I said. He didn't even acknowledge me. "Hey," I said. "Stop." I ran forward and shot around the corner, and there was this sensation.

The corridor was empty.

Ruth was in the crew lounge when I arrived. She was drinking her tea with her back to me.

"Have you —" I said.

"Yaaa!" she said, twirling around in her chair. She looked up at me and relaxed. "Oh, Jesus, don't sneak up on me like that."

"Have you seen those pressure-suit gloves that I found in the cargo bay?"

"Over on the counter," she said.

I picked them up and looked at them. The red fabric seemed thin for a pressure-suit glove. The connectors that seal them to the rest of the suit were very new. Expensive. I opened the ship's locker. Four pressure suits. Ten years old. White.

"What are you doing?" Ruth wanted to know.

I didn't answer her.

I made my way up to the bridge. I opened the

emergency locker. Two pressure suits with easy snap-on helmets. White.

I went down to engineering. Linda looked up at me as I opened her pressure-suit locker.

"Look at this, Linda. Red gloves. Red."

"Yes?"

"We don't have a single red pressure suit on this ship."

"Perhaps a cargo-handler —"

"Linda, how does hyper-space work?"

She shrugged. "What can I say? A lot of it's beyond me."

"You said that there was little chance that two ships would ever meet in hyper-space."

"Well, superstring physics tells us that there's a bunch of dimensions left over from the big bang. We live in three-dimensional space. Hyper-space is a higher-level dimensional space. Eight, I think. We preserve a sense of three dimensions using a phase envelope." She stopped. "Is this what you want to hear?"

I nodded. "Linda, if two ships were almost in the same place, their Phase Envelopes would overlap, wouldn't they?"

"I suppose so."

"And what might that look like to us?"

She didn't answer.

I continued: "Would it be possible that they would interfere? Like two radio stations. Sometimes you hear one station, and sometimes you hear the other. They fade back and forth. That's it, get it?"

She said nothing, but she understood. That much I knew.

I was sitting in the dark when Debbie entered. She turned on the lights and rubbed her eyes.

"Mac?" she said, yawning. "It's two in the morning. What are you doing?"

"I can't explain it, Deb. This is where you saw your ghosts. I'm hoping that the fields are strongest here."

"Is that your service revolver?"

I took it off of the table and slipped it into the pocket of my bathrobe.

"Mac, I think you should talk to Ruth. We're all going a little buggy, but you're scaring me."

"In the morning, Deb."

"You won't forget, will you?"

"Good night, Debbie." She stood there and looked at me for a long time. She turned away and flicked out the light.

I waited.

Linda!" I shouted as I pounded on her door. It irised open, revealing teddy bear pajamas.

"Mac?" she said groggily.

"Linda," I said, "get up."

"Mac, your face," she said, suddenly awake.

"You've got blood all over you. What —"

"No time. Look —"

"Mac, you look terrible. Carolyn, get up. Go get Ruth. Mac's hurt."

Carolyn stirred somewhere behind Linda. "Whaz-zit?" she managed.

"Linda, take this to engineering." I held out the device.

She stared at it for a long time. "Mac?" she said. She took the phase coil from me. "Where did you get this?"

"It should fit. Take a cold shower before you begin. I don't want you to damage it 'cause you're half asleep."

"You did it, didn't you?" she said. "You son of a bitch, you stole this."

"I'd like to test it out in the morning."

Linda stood in her doorway and stared at me like I was some kind of monster.

Ruth's door opened: "What's going on out here?"

I turned in her direction. She was shielding her eyes from the hall lights, but they widened when she saw me.

"Is there a doctor in the house?" I said. Nobody laughed.

What the hell have you been fighting with?" Ruth said as she put a thick bandage over the gash on my shoulder.

"A hallucination and I had a disagreement over a girl," I said.

She looked at me sternly. "I mean the truth."

I stared back at her. "Ruth," I said, "I'm not going to tell you." I leaned back and stared up at the ceiling. "Ask Linda. She knows."

"I tried that. She won't say, either."

I sat in the crew galley with my feet up on the table. Debbie was the first one to show up, and I looked at her strangely. Her sweater stuck out around the shape of unnaturally large breasts. Overnight, she had gone from size B to double-D.

"Something wrong?" Debbie said.

"Nothing," I responded coolly.

Carolyn and Ruth came in after a moment. Carolyn's bustline extended at least eight inches from her ribcage. Ruth's matronly bosom was like a pair of basketballs, but lumpier.

I gave all three of them a disapproving look. "Okay!" I said. "Let's not try to be subtle, eh?"

They all looked innocent. "Whatever do you mean?" Ruth said. I knew then that Ruth had organized it all. Her way of bringing things back to normal on board.

"I do believe, ma'am, that you're retaining water."

"It's a symptom of misjump sickness."

It was about then that Linda came in and looked around the table. "What's going on?" she said.

Debbie spoke up: "We're trying to keep the Captain's attention."

Linda said nothing but merely sat down at the table. She never looked at me.

I said, "Linda was able to make some repairs to the drive unit. At oh-six-hundred hours this morning, we came out of hyper-space without incident."

"Yeah!" said Debbie.

"We're about two light-days off target, so we're plotting a micro-jump for early afternoon. Debbie, please let the passengers know that we will only be a few hours off schedule."

"Sure thing, Boss."

"Also, when we dock at Centauri IV, you have budget for three grunts to unload the cargo. See if you can make up for lost time." She nodded. "That's everything, folks, unless somebody has something else?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"Very well. Next stop: Centauri," I said. I licked my lips and smirked. "Or bust," I added.

They groaned.

Three weeks later, in the Wolf 359 system, I stopped in one of my favorite waterholes after visiting the Portmaster. I ordered vodka and O.J. and sat down to read the paper.

A call had gone out for word on the *SS Lotus Blossom*, missing almost a month, when it jumped out of the Epsilon Indi system bound for Earth.

There was a lengthy interview with Indi Portmaster Von Braun. It was clear that his Tourism people had coached him; he kept stressing that pirate activity in the Epsilon Indi system was almost non-existent.

"No," he was quoted as saying, "for my money, I'm guessing that it was a misjump. The *Lotus Blossom* belonged to a corporate fleet. Only three years old, but never safety-checked. Very sloppy. That, and a virgin captain, too. It all adds up to misjump."

I thought about the crew of the *Lotus Blossom*, stuck in hyper-space almost a month now, and I knew what they were feeling: anger, frustration, depression. I remembered wondering how long it would be before someone did something unforgivable.

And now I know. □

Can a White Boy Sing the Blues?

By Greg Costikyan

Art by Lori Deitrick

The train moved silently through darkness, levitating above its rail. Inside, soft yellow light illuminated tired faces. Outside were boarded-up windows and crumbling buildings, a South Bronx curiously unchanged in a changing world. Marissa was three places at once: Her body sat on a bench in the train, hot air from beneath the seat making her sleepy. Her mind was elsewhere, funnelled through the glowing screen of her laptop, the modem in the laptop, the local-area radiophone network, a Motorola satellite in low-earth orbit, back to a ground station somewhere in New Jersey, a packet-switching network on the ground, and, somewhere, irrelevant to anyone but an expert in Net topography, into a computer, a file server reading Paterculus. But in spirit she was located somewhere near the Forum, some time in the First Century A.D., lips moving slightly over the resonant Latin.

The subway slowed. Marissa looked up, blinked, then quickly shut down the laptop and gathered her books. 168th Street and home.

She stalked down the street toward the river, one hand in her pocket, holding the can of mace. Marissa was always relieved when the front door buzzed and she gained the sanctuary of the foyer. Climbing the stairs, she could hear the locks in the apartment door clicking; Dad met her on the landing and took her books. "You all right, girl?" he asked.

He looked tired, she thought; bags under his eyes, his hair getting whiter every day. "Yes, Dad," she said. "I'm sorry I'm late; I was studying"

He smiled and patted her on the back. "No problem," he said. "I kept dinner warm."

She shucked her jacket and hung it in the closet, next to Dad's gunbelt. "I've decided to apply to Dartmouth," she said.

Dad was inside the kitchenette, clanging pans. "Dartmouth?" he said. "What's a girl like you gonna do snowed in all winter in New Hampshire?"

"Mr. Tinton says they have a good history department," she said, sitting down at the tiny dining table.

Dad appeared with pots and hot pads. "Long way away," he grumbled.

"And they have a good scholarship program," she said.

"Like the sound of that," he said, smiling. "Eat up." He sat down with her, but didn't eat; he'd

already done so. "Have to be going soon," he said.

"I know," she said. "Today okay?"

He grunted. "No worse than any other," he said. "My feet are killing me. Somebody held up Amsterdam Liquors. Got away before I got there. Lady complained that the junkies over by Columbia Presbyterian were hassling her; I gave 'em a lecture. Don't know why they gotta beg; public assistance takes care of 'em."

"Until they die," she said.

"Yeah," he said. "Well, better than the old days."

Marissa nodded, her mouth full. She hadn't lived during Prohibition, but the statistics said violent crime was way down since repeal. She swallowed. "Are you going to put in more overtime this weekend?" she said.

He sighed. "Much as they let me," he said, rubbing his eyes wearily. She put a hand on his.

A cop's pension was based on his final three years' earnings — overtime included. Cops usually did as much overtime as they could in their final year on the force. Twenty years and out; a hell of a job, but the pay wasn't bad, and you were fully vested in twenty. Damn few stuck around for twenty-one.

He patted her hand. "Your mom would have been proud," he said, his own pride in his voice. "A daughter in college."

"I haven't gotten in yet, Dad," she said, half-embarrassed.

"You will," he said, and rose. "Gotta get dressed." He went into the bedroom to prepare for his night job. She kissed him before he left, and locked both locks behind him, sliding the police bar into place.

After he'd gone, she sat and toyed with her salad and promised herself, not for the first time, that someday he wouldn't have to work — not two jobs and overtime, anyway.

She knew she'd make it. She was smart. She worked hard. A history degree; then law school; then one of the big firms downtown. Partner by thirty.

She had it all planned.

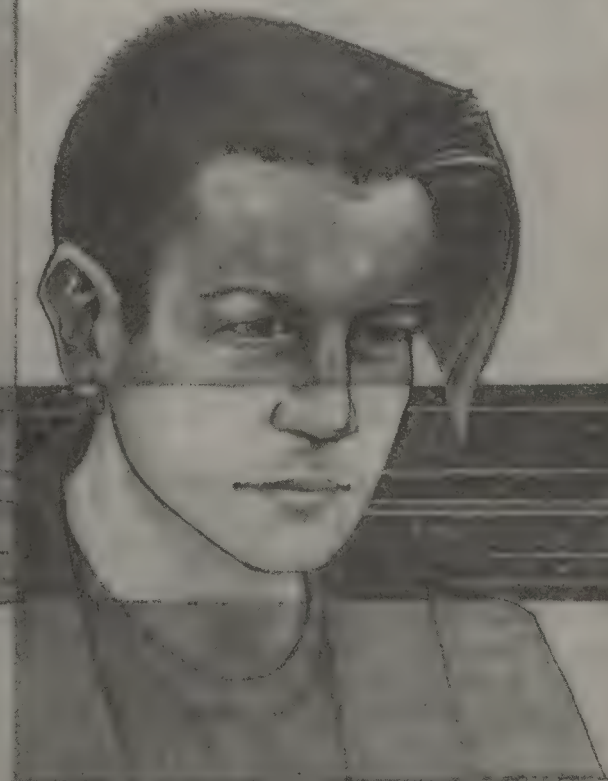
She stood up and carried the dishes into the kitchen.

Back to the 'burbs. Donoi jumped from the train as it glided to a silent stop, ignoring the conductor's outstretched hand, then hustled down



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LORI DEWITT 1993

the stairs. His bike was still chained where he had left it; he unlocked it and, crouched over the bars, whistled through the night. He passed a line of cars, electric engines noiseless as they waited for the light to change. Checking that no one was coming, he rode through a red light. Someone honked behind him; he flipped them the bird.

Barney met him at the door, tie off and shirt open, a scotch in one hand. "Where you been?" he asked.

"Around," Donoi said. "Where's Mary?"

"God knows where your mother is," Barney muttered, sliding his free hand through what was left of his hair. "Another goddamn meeting, I expect."

"Yeh," said Donoi, sidling around his father and heading for the stairs.

"You done your homework yet?" Barney yelled after him, but Donoi ignored the sally. Well, no, but that's what the commute up to school in the Bronx is for.

Squirt was watching TV in the den; some idiot commercial wafted up the stairs after Donoi: "...gengineer your eyes the color you always wanted! Call 1-800 ..." Donoi slammed the door to his room, threw the ball into the hoop a couple of times, then slouched on his bed and grabbed the phone. He punched for voice-only and dialed Marissa's number — she didn't have a vidphone.

Thumb over the button (no way was he going to talk to her Dad the cop), Donoi listened to the phone ring. "Hello?" said a voice; not her Dad.

"Hi, Marissa," he said.

"Donoi," she said. "Where were you today?"

"I cut school," he said indifferently.

"Obviously," she said. "You know, you're going to fail Latin."

"Maybe," said Donoi. "I always do okay on the tests."

"They have this silly notion that you have to be physically present in class to pass," Marissa said.

"Yeah, yeah," said Donoi. "What are you, my Mom?"

There was silence for a moment. Then Marissa said, "I'm sorry, Donoi. Why did you call?"

"Uh — are you doing anything Saturday?"

"No — not really. What have you got in mind?"

"They're having a New Music festival in Brooklyn," Donoi said. "Near Coney Island."

"That sounds like fun," she said.

"Meet you at the Port Authority bus station?" he said. "Bout eleven?"

"Okay."

After he hung up, Donoi lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling for a while. God, she was gorgeous. Little square, maybe, but awfully smart. He really liked her.

Abruptly, he rolled over, then jacked into the Net. He only had a few days to finish his game. Monday, Sixtysix would yea or nay.

Marissa and Donoi walked down a street in Sheepshead Bay. She wore bobby socks and a plaid skirt, very preppy; he was in black-on-black: black pants, black shirt, black tie, black porkpie hat. They burred at one another, talking about the festival.

The street was what passed for commercial, hereabouts: Jack's Odd-Lot, Hansen Floor Coverings, Joey's Lunch. On the corner, near Joey's Lunch, lounged six guys, jeans and T-shirts, a pack of cigarettes rolled into the sleeve of one arm. They stared at Marissa and Donoi with hostility.

A race thing? A class thing? Marissa looked a little preppy. Donoi looked like a punk: poor, but poor by choice, not by education and lack of skills. A punk: contemptible foe, to reject what a joe from Sheepshead Bay could not aspire to.

They made kissy-face sucking sounds.

Donoi broke off talking.

"Ignore them," said Marissa, trying to hustle him toward the monorail station.

"Shit," said Donoi, doing his best not to look at the six.

"Hey, hey, chickie," said one. "You like white cock?"

Donoi stumbled in rage.

"Yeh," chuckled another. "Ditch the punk, babe. We got all the white cock you can handle." General laughter.

One of them walked in front of Donoi.

"You hear me, pal?" he said.

"No —" Marissa said, but she was too late. Donoi lunged at the boy, drove a fist into stomach. His hand didn't sink very far; a solid slab of muscle there.

Five guys pushed off from the side of the building. Donoi slammed into the sidewalk, face scraping against cement. A heavy workboot headed for his balls; he twisted aside in time to take it on the hip.

Out came Marissa's mace. *Psst*.

One guy screamed and pawed at his eyes.

Another tried to grab her arm. She shoved three fingers into his Adam's apple, thinking, "Just like Daddy told me to do." Another *Psst*. The others backed away.

The street was suddenly empty. She helped Donoi get to his feet. "Shitshitshitshit," he said under his breath.

"The maglev station's two blocks," she said. "Let's get out of here before they come back."

"Yeah," he said.

On the train back to the city, he could barely sit still, twitching and clenching his fists in rage and humiliation, revenge fantasies running through his head. He shoves a car aerial into a wind-pipe; he breaks an arm on his knee; he ... he knew it was fantasy. He was a wimp. He was a jerk.

Marissa slumped like the dead, tucking her head into Donoi's arm. She, too, was filled with rage; rage and self-doubt. Who was she kidding? All her life, she'd face the same damn thing; even in the most liberal, sophisticated place, the color of her skin would never not be noticed, for good or ill. It would be a struggle, a struggle

The image she saw before her eyes was not of violence; it was of her brother, her brother in some damn alley somewhere, a needle in his arm, fingers swollen with the dope, eyes vague with purple haze, living the bliss of fools. Her brother, of whom her dad never spoke. Her brother, who believed that the world was against you, that prejudice bespoke despair, that the struggle was not worth the effort because at its end lay a broken heart, and a broken heart was more easily achieved without struggle.

The hell with him. The hell with the world. The hell with the hopeless faces and tired eyes on the streets of home. College. Law school. A big firm downtown. Partner by thirty.

She would not fail. She would not ...

It's an ofay world, whispered the voice of her brother. *You ain't going nowhere. They gonna let a nigger girl make partner by thirty? Who're you kidding?*

... not fail.

The train whispered into the 34th Street station.

"Your stop," she told Donoi. He could change here for the PATH to Jersey.

He put an arm around her. "I'm taking you home," he said with determination.

"All right," she said, forbearing to point out that it was she who had protected him, and not the reverse.

Still, she worried a little bit. It would be dark by the time they got to Harlem. And he would have to walk back to the monorail station alone, a white boy at night on 168th.

Barney's study: Victoria would have been comfortable in it. There were heavy oak tables, shelves of expensive leather-clad books (unread), and deep leather chairs. Hidden behind the couch were dozens of Readman disks — mysteries and thrillers, Barney's actual reading of choice.

The envelope from Columbia lay on the table, next to a copy of *Institutional Investor* that Barney had now forgotten.

"You listen to me, young man," he shouted, face dangerously red. "You think life is going to — going to come crawling to you on a platter?"

"I ..."

"You're going to college!"

"No," said Donoi, becoming more certain as he spoke. "No, I'm not."

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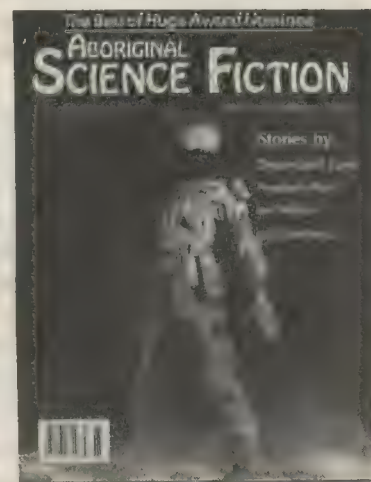
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"And what the Sam Hill are you going to do? Futz around with your goddamn games?"

"Yeah," said Donoi.

"You think you're going to become a fucking star, is that it? Net contract, groupies, fame and fortune? You know what the odds are? Living in a fucking fantasy."

"It's not ... I'm good ... I ..."

"You think all this materializes out of fresh air?" said Barney, waving a hand and meaning the six-bedroom house in a Bergen County 'burb. "How're you going to live? You've had it easy all your life. You don't have any idea of the cost ..."

"Yeah, yeah," said Donoi, bored.

Barney became redder. "Fine, you little prick," he said dangerously. "Fine. Work my ass off for twenty years so you can go to college, and you want to go starve someplace in a slum. Be my guest."

"I'm seventeen," said Donoi defiantly. "I can do what I want ..."

"Get the fuck out of here!" Barney screamed, heaving a marble pipe rest in Donoi's general direction.

Donoi scuttled out the door, plunged up the stairs, and slammed the door to his room.

Fingers shaking, he picked through his disks. Miles Davis, classic jazz, cool down, cool down, boy.

Seventeen, he told himself. Age of consent. Legal adult, these days, good libertarian law. Leave me the fuck alone.

Robert is biking along the mountain highway, lungs laboring in the thin air, air so thin that the sky is purple, and stars shine through even in broad daylight. They materialize by the side of the road.

Five of them. Clad in scruffy cast-offs, packs on their backs, ammunition belts across their chests. Automatic weapons in their arms.

"Shit," thinks Robert. "The government said this road was clear." He brakes desperately. By the time he comes to a stop, three weapons are pointed at his head.

"Get him away from the bike," says Consuela. "You, gringo. What is your name?"

"Robert Marguiles," Robert says, dazed and frightened as the guerrillas search through his possessions. So much for his pleasant biking holiday.

"Listen to me, Robert," says Consuela. "You are now a prisoner of the Revolution ..."

"... Then you know nothing of this," Diego says doubtfully. Robert, clamped to the chair, swallows, hoping they will believe him.

Consuela takes a drag on her cigarette, smoke curling from her nostrils around the angles of her face, around her close-cropped hair. Her shirt, a cast-off like the clothing of all of them, is tight, tight

and wet with sweat in the steamy heat. Robert tries to avoid noticing the visibility of her nipples.

"I will get him to talk," says Juan dangerously.

"No, no," says Marquez calmly. "Those are not the methods of the revolution ..."

"... They call you communists," Robert says.

Marquez snorts. "No," he says, "we believe in property."

"But you wish to nationalize the great estates ..."

"Have you not read your Mill?" says Marquez. "The owner of land is the one who mixes his labor with the soil. Who owns the estates? The peons who work them. The land was stolen from them at the time of the Conquista. We seek only to restore it to its rightful owners ..."

... It is hot in the little hut. Marquez and Diego stand by the windows, weapons at the ready, peering into the twilight. There is the buzz of insect life.

The middle-aged man in the short-sleeved shirt is sweating badly, from fear as much as heat. "My principal will pay thirty thousand ecu if you destroy the power line," he says.

"That will cripple the harvest on the Attrepez estate," says Rodrigo.

"Striking a blow for ... for the Revolution," says the middle-aged man.

Juan snorts. "For your friend," he says, "who no doubt is a competitor of Attrepez."

"Thirty thousand ecu buys a lot of ammunition," says Consuela.

"Can you trust him?" says Robert. "It could be a set-up."

They stare at him. "Why should you care?" asks Juan belligerently.

Robert shrugs helplessly. Consuela gives him a smile ...

... The sky afire with rockets and searching choppers, Consuela runs toward him, blood seeping from a wound in her arm, her weapon still clutched in her hand. Juan and Marquez follow after, Marquez hauling the heavy machine gun.

"You were right," Consuela gasps to Robert. "The soldiers ..."

"The swamp," grunts Juan. "It is our best chance."

Robert blanches, thinking of leeches and malaria. His quinine is long gone ...

... In the tangle of sheets in the Quonset hut, he runs his fingers down her leg once more, feeling hard muscle under satin skin.

"You will tell them in America?" Consuela breathes.

He can only nod his head and hug her closely. Outside, the engine of the little Beechcraft that will carry him north sputters to life ...

Donoi unjacked and sat up, rubbing his neck. He was a little stiff from lying on the couch.

Sixtysix was slower; he lay there for a long moment, aging black flesh slumping in repose. Then he too sat up, unjacking, rubbing his eyes. The whites of those eyes were yellow, flecks of red in them; too many late nights, too much booze, too many bad drugs. The occupational hazards of the game designer. Sixtysix sighed.

"What do you think?" Donoi wanted to blurt, but he didn't. Sixtysix would tell him; wasn't that why he'd played? And Donoi was too much in awe of the man to put the question that baldly.

Sixtysix turned to the gray-bearded man — Callahan, Donoi remembered. "What do you say, Jimmy?"

"Good emotion," Callahan said, "but I felt a little limited, playing Juan."

Sixtysix nodded. "You're thinking novel, television, movie script," he rumbled to Donoi. "One main character, audience identification. But you don't got an audience, boy. You got players. Six of 'em, in this module. You gotta give everyone a heavy role; no one should feel like a spear carrier."

Donoi drank it in, nodding; it was obvious once pointed out.

"But," said Sixtysix, "Jimmy is right. Good emotion. A lotta greenies freeze on that. You want the players to feel like it's real, like it means something to them; you got that. Coming up, my first thought was: pretty good, for a white boy."

Donoi flushed with pride. He *knew* it was pretty good. He *knew* it.

Sixtysix pulled himself off the couch with the slowness of a man who knows he's going to feel pain. "I'll take you on, if you really want," he said. "But why you should want, I'm damned if I know; it's a dog's life."

"You think you can sell it?"

"This game?" said the black man, looking toward the bar. "Maybe, maybe not. You're good enough, though; if not this one, the next one. Come by my office tomorrow, we'll look over an agency contract. You got a lawyer?"

Donoi nodded his head; if Dad wouldn't find him one, Mary would.

"Good," rumbled Sixtysix. "I'll buy you a drink."

Donoi wandered down the street. He was a little drunk; a little drunk with ambition, with exuberance, with Cuba Libres. Seventeen, age of consent, he could damn well drink if he wanted to.

He smiled at every girl and looked in the window of every store. Even the big brass espresso machine in the window of Cafe Laguna seemed somehow fascinating, tonight, tonight of all nights.

There was the flatscreen display above the engineering parlor, running animated ads for the Can a White Boy ...?

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wonders they had for sale — and every ad ending in the pitch:

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Donoi stared at it, considered it, then, drunk with possibility, pushed open the door.

You understand how the process works?" said the technician.

"Uh ... vaguely," said Donoi.

"You're injected with a virus," said the technician. "All viruses hijack a part of your cells' operations. This one is specially designed to go in, edit your DNA to give you the required characteristic, reproduce, and keep on going. It dies off once all — well, 99% — of your cells have been transformed."

"No chance of infecting anyone else?" says Donoi.

"It's never happened," said the technician. "The virus you've chosen will activate melanin production in your skin cells. You should see a change in a week or so, but the change will be gradual. You won't be really black for at least six months. Also, remember, nothing else is changing; your hair will be straight, you'll have none of the secondary racial characteristics."

"Cool," said Donoi with a grin.

"You are seventeen?" said the technician.

"Sure," said Donoi, reaching for his ID.

Mary, Barney, and the Squirt were all in the kitchen when Donoi dragged himself out of bed. Barney scowled and said, "Where were you last night?"

So Donoi told them.

"My son the Negro," said Mary, trying the phrase out for size.

Barney's mouth worked but nothing came out.

"Wow!" said Squirt, eyes huge.

"Are you crazy?" Mary asked. "Why would you want ..."

"You're doing this to hurt us, aren't you," said Barney, practically spitting.

"No, I ..."

Barney turned to Mary. "This is your fault!" he screamed. "No discipline! None! Every time I try to talk sense to the boy, it's 'Don't be so hard on him.' What did you think ..."

"My fault?" said Mary, in a low tone. "Don't talk to me about my fault, Mr. 'Honey, I Have to Work Late.' You are, you're ..."

Donoi got himself a Diet Coke from the fridge. "Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad," he said. "See you later. Got a hot date."

"You come back here!" shouted Barney, but Donoi was gone.

Donoi had the keys to the studio in his pocket. The renter was a friend, a friend conveniently away for the weekend.

Donoi and Marissa sat in the back of the PATH train, the place that offered the most privacy. Even so, the other passengers chuckled from time to time.

They hung on each other all the way from the PATH station, a ten-minute walk through frigid air that took them twenty.

Up the stoop of the converted brownstone. Donoi fumbled with the keys until Marissa took them and expertly undid the locks.

There was the bed, but ... "Down, boy," Donoi thought, and pulled her onto the couch for long moments of spooning.

There was a full moon out there, or near enough, shining through the high branches of a tree in the courtyard, branches bare in the winter night.

There was only the sound of their own breathing, and a little wind, a little whistle through the window.

He lay behind her, happy, loose, satiated, one Harm about her, one finger tracing along the black satin of her skin. Should he tell her? Could he tell her? What would she ...

"Donoi?" she said.

"Mmm?"

"I have something to tell you."

"Mmm?"

"Umm — I'm not sure how to say this. But ..."

So she sat up, pulled the sheets around herself, and told him.

"But ... why would you ... you're so beautiful," he said, stunned. "Why would you want to be white?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she said, a little bitter. "What's the advantage in being black?"

"Advantage?" repeated Donoi, in blank incomprehension.

So he told her.

She looked at him in shock. "But that's crazy," she said.

"That's what my mother said," said Donoi, swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

"She's right," said Marissa firmly.

"I don't know if I can deal with this," said Donoi. "Your becoming white. I don't understand it."

"What's your problem?" said Marissa, a little beligerently. "You only like black girls?"

Donoi stared at her, aghast. "No!" he said. "That's not it! But why would you turn white?"

"Are you blind?" she said. "Do you think it's helpful to be black in this society?"

"Well — good Christ!" said Donoi. "Isn't that a reason to be black?"

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Not," she said, "if you intend to succeed."

"Now," said Donoi, "you sound like my father.

Have you told your Dad?"

"Oh, God," said Marissa, burying her head in her knees. "Not yet. He's not going to like it."

"Damn right," said Donoi.

Marissa was irritated by his self-righteous tone. "I was hoping you'd understand," she said. "No one else is going to."

Emotions churning, Donoi could only shake his head.

"I think I'd better go," he said.

"One of us ought to," she said. "I can't see another six hours of this."

"Yeah," said Donoi, fumbling for his pants. "Yeah. Damn."

He looked up and caught her eye. They stared for a moment. Then, he leaned over, and kissed her softly.

"I'll leave you the keys," he said, looking away. "Lock up when you go, and put them in the mailbox."

"Okay," she said, eyes hooded.

Donoi finished dressing.

Donoi sidled down the Jersey City street, black pants, black shirt, black tie — black man, he thought to himself sardonically. Victorian rowhouses hung above him, the blank windows of a boarded-up warehouse, grass gray in the nighttime

peeping up between slate flags. He was half sad, half glad; God knew what would happen to him, but he was good, he knew he was. He was going somewhere, if only to hell, but somewhere, somewhere his parents could never dream of. And maybe, just maybe, the bright lights would be his: a million-dollar contract, Net distribution, fame and fortune.

Marissa, he thought, shaking his head. He'd always known she wanted to be a lawyer, an ambition he could not understand. How dull; discovery proceedings, motions and countermotions, billable hours. Not, he told himself, a life for a dog.

Just as well, he told himself with the callousness of youth; she'd be going off somewhere to college, and he'd be staying in the city. The relationship would not have lasted another year.

But then a lump came up in his throat as he remembered her in Brooklyn, can of mace in one hand, and those bastards

Damn, he thought.

The moon shone forth a thin, wavering light as if it were drunk; somewhere, a cat yowled its lust into the night.

Saxophone, thought Donoi. There ought to be a saxophone, street like this, night like this. In his head, he heard *Rhapsody in Blue*. □

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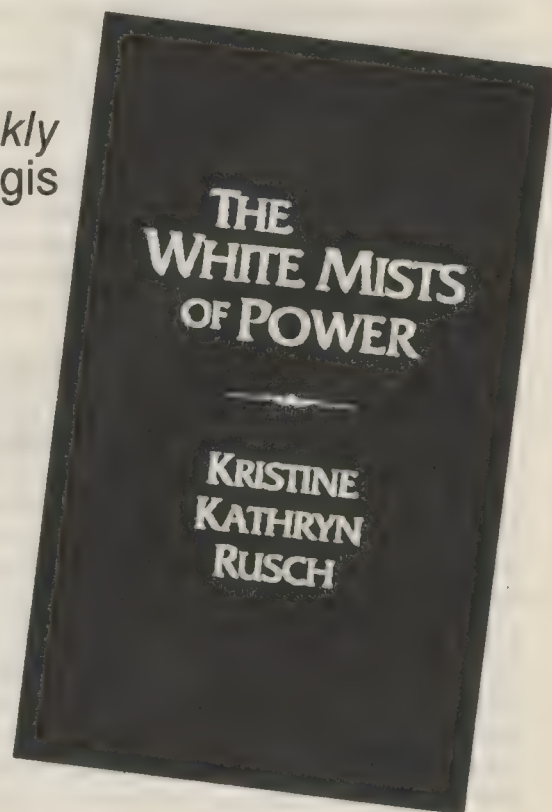
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The Sorrows of Your Changing Face

By Brian A. Hopkins

Art by Robert Pasternak

*When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;*

*How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;*

*And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.*

— William Butler Yeats

There are gates on Earth, thousands of them, but it's to the *original* gate that Chandra Ben Warthen returns. The gate at Copernicus. On Luna.

A quarter million miles away, the blue-green marble of his homeworld spins against a dark crawling with stars and *otherness*. Shrouded in purged white waves of cumulus, it's not the same Earth he left fourteen months (thirty-eight years?) ago. But then, it never is.

Always changing. The face of a mother from whom he's been gone too long. Older. Wiser. The both of them.

Warthen has no intention of going downworld. He'll stay in Sol System no longer than he has to. Not because the dark beckons so loudly, rather because the past whispers so softly. For that reason he chooses the forsaken lunar gate. Here there'll be no one waiting. And no one *not* waiting.

Copernicus Gate stands apart from the surrounding complex — as it did four hundred and eighty years ago (realtime) when he first stepped through. Those first years there was a great deal of nervous uncertainty about the gates: speculation that one might blow at any moment, taking half a world in the blink of an eye to deposit it in some far galaxy; fear that something might one day step through. So they installed the first gate a safe distance away on Earth's moon. It stands there yet, a tall silent monolith, somewhat remote from the morass of abandoned rocket pads and scattered laboratories, the pitted saurian hulks of mining and transportation vehicles, and the long rails of the mass driver. The gate's mate was placed in geosynchronous Earth orbit, an unnerving threshold across which

Warthen had been the first to step. Afterwards they moved the orbital gate — time and the hundred gates he's opened since fog his memory of where — and the vast network began.

Twining, the technologists called it back then, hinting at the gate's creation of a traveler's exact duplicate, skirting questions about the destruction of the original. For decades the debates, scientific, social, and theological, raged. Eventually those who knew a time before the gates grew old and tired, died, and were replaced by generations who knew no other mode of travel. A few splinter groups remained, the Contra-technos, the Originists, but world opinion was driven by youngsters with their eyes on the stars. Reckless children accepted the gates as just another daily technological tool. Forgotten were the versions of themselves destroyed every time they stepped through.

Struggling to recall a suitable stride for lunar gravity, Warthen hop-walks past the launching stage where forty-pound packages of plagioclase, anorthosite, ilmenite, and other ore were once wrapped in lunar silica and hurled over the horizon. At an escape velocity of a mile and a half per second, the packages would slip in a graceful, gravity-induced arc to a point forty thousand miles above the lunar far side where they were intercepted. Luna's resources were used to build Earth Station, that graceful lady spinning brighter than any star in a halo orbit about the L4 point. Long before the station was complete, however, the gates rendered the mass driver obsolete. Copernicus soon became the stellar equivalent of a ghost town. But it was the lunar colony that first started the station, the station that built the ships that hauled the gates, and the gates that opened the stars to mankind.

The rails of the mass driver appear to meet in the distance, there in the shadow of the Copernican rim. He knows it's a lie, an illusion. No matter how far or how fast you run, you never catch your twin. It paces, always just out of reach, mocking with reminders of wrong choices, broken promises, and petty betrayals, whispering of all the things you're missing.

Around the domed power plant, through the long bays of rust-hued hydrox electrolyzers, and up a pock-marked path — an intrepid explorer wrapped



in a shimmering cloak of composite particles — Warthen makes his way to Port Authority.

Color shifts near the speed of light: photic aberrations as the Doppler effect works its magic, the stark blue-white of stars clustered in the center of the viewport and the distorted radiance of those shifting towards the periphery ... all seen through his own diaphanous reflection. Terror, awe, sorrow, and regret — he's watched his emotions play like theater across a face superimposed over stars.

Time dilates. Einstein's ancient $E=mc^2$. Measured reality attenuates and mass increases — but only to the stationary observer. For Chandra Ben Warthen, slipping silent through the long dark night, one set of measurements is as *real* as any other. He's a ghost outside time's domain, running in a hyper-reality where everything (and *everyone*) he's left behind accelerates in a mad dance. Days, months, years, even decades, they are no more than words. Time is anything he chooses it to be.

Yet, heartache and sorrow remain immeasurable constants, bittersweet companions across the vast emptiness between suns. He cannot forget the gentle curve of her smile, the shifting colors in the depths of her eyes, the supple lines of her face. Sometimes it's Letha's face he sees reflected in the viewport. The stars behind that painful visage seem to shift and lose their place. At those times he can do no more than rage and weep, locked within his throbbing confine of steel, hurtling toward a star that mankind will one day visit — once he's opened a gateway.

In her frenzied dance, even at the speed relativity relates it to him, Letha has a lifetime to forget. He, on the other hand, remembers like it was yesterday.

When the archaic airlock completes its cycle and the inner door opens on a dim corridor, Warthen does not immediately drop his personal field. Stepping across the threshold, he looks left and right for some atmospheric clue. Only the cautious survive life in space. Warthen's principal axiom is, "Take Nothing for Granted."

There's a water dispenser several meters down the left corridor. Its inverted tank is more than half full of placid fluid. Safe then. He deactivates his body field. The shimmering cloak winks out as charged particles spin away at the speed of light. A rush of cool air greets him. The air is alive with the smells of humanity. He breathes deep, nearly shuddering at the intimate touch of life in his lungs.

A placard advises him that the office he seeks is to the right. He arrives to find a wizened old man sleeping behind a counter. The sleeper's outdated hull boots, locked comfortably to the aluminum wall, identify him as a spacer: hull mechanic, plating specialist, any of a hundred null-gee professions

flooded with the unemployed.

Warthen plugs his ident into the counter's data panel. It takes a moment for the machine to assimilate his card — personal identification has undoubtedly undergone several revisions since his card was issued. Eventually, the old man's terminal beeps as data scrolls up. He awakens with a growl.

"What d'ya want?"

"Name's Warthen. Gaterunner. I want another run." He tosses the old man a data card. "You can put that out on the nets. The Narcissan gate's open."

The boots release with an almost imperceptible *click*, and the spacer's feet drop loudly to the floor. "Warthen, you said?" He squints at the screen.

"Just in from Narcissa." In case the old man didn't catch it the first time.

The spacer wipes at dust that's gathered on the terminal screen. Warthen realizes his caution in the ancient airlock was justified: dust in any closed environment leads eventually to systems failure, maybe even death.

He studies the data for a moment, then turns his attention to Warthen. His eyes narrow. "Chandra Ben Warthen," he whispers. In his voice Warthen hears the awe that the narrowed eyes seek to hide. "I thought you'd be much older."

Warthen jerks free his ident. "Tell them Narcissa's open. Get me another run."

There are but a handful of gaterunners who run alone. Solitary, lonely men and women, burned in one way or another by society, most are seeking to escape something or someone. Easy to get lost in time when it has so little meaning at the speed of light. Easy to forget someone when you know they'll have forgotten you, perhaps even grown old and died, in your absence.

Most gateships are family enterprises. Familiar faces to share the months of boredom and the brief but spectacular wonders of a new world. Someone's hand to hold as you make that leap of faith through the new gate.

Chandra Ben Warthen has no family.

No siblings. Parents killed when he was five.

Freak accident, the transportation engineers said. Poor design was more the truth. In his mind's eye Warthen holds the image of his parents rushing forever outward, gaterunners with no destination and no scheduled return. Though gates didn't even exist when his parents were alive, it helps to think of them that way. He can almost believe that it was a discarded set of parental twins that missed turnover and slammed into a Lake Pontchartrain staging terminal at three hundred miles an hour.

The railcar had viewports, each small enough that no adult could fit through (though many tried). His father broke out the glass. While Mother screamed to hurry, weeping against Father's broad

back, and the terminal, aswarm with terrified, scurrying travelers, approached at a horrifying speed, Warthen Senior held his son at arm's length and looked at him one last time. He tried to say something, "I love you," perhaps, but the words caught in his throat, and big tears broke from his soft brown eyes. Then he shoved his son through the jagged remains of the port.

The wind caught the small boy and carried him up and away, slinging him far out over the lake. As long as he lives, Warthen will never forget his terror, a fear so encompassing that he didn't even feel the mortal lacerations up and down the length of his body. His blood blew on the wind like gay streamers, like the smoke trails of bygone skywriters. From that day on he would fear absolutely nothing, not even that first step from Luna to Earth orbit through the unknown dimension of the gate.

Well, that isn't entirely true. He was shaking the day he waited for Letha to join him at his gateship, terrified that she wouldn't show up. And she didn't.

Warthen died that day in New Orleans — almost five hundred years ago. Wounds from the viewport. Impact with the lake. Drowning. A lake skimmer swept up his battered corpse, just one more piece of drifting refuse to the mechanized devourer of pollution. If an attentive dockworker hadn't spotted him when the skimmer came in for processing, Warthen would have been recycled and flushed back into the lake as base elements.

Dead at age five. Yet so long as there's a recoverable body, death ceased to be a deterrent to medical science years ago. The medtechs with their molecular restructuring computers, tiny surgeons whose operating theater is the human cell, repaired the damage and brought him back. But for his parents, splattered throughout the terminal building with the other passengers, there was no such resurrection.

Warthen recalls very little of being dead, but sometimes he dreams of an ultimate gate where a million time-phased versions of himself wait on the far side. They beckon, smiling with their identical mouths and eyes. They open their arms and call to him, but his dream lacks sound, as if it exists only in vacuum. Still he can read their lips. *Brother, they call. Come with us, brother.*

He goes to them. They embrace him. And then they rip him limb from limb and scatter him among the stars.

When he awakens from the dream, it's all he can do to keep from shutting down the ship's vast magnetic scoops, dumping the interstellar hydrogen he's caught. With no fuel and the right vector, he'll glide forever through the infinite night, as incapable of making turnover as his parents were.

He sees it as a form of suicidal immortality.

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Liquor and information. Timeless commodities for sale in any port. Establishments that deal in them are never far from Port Authority ... even here.

The bar isn't much, a squat quonset hut made from a refurbished payload canister. The walls have tarnished to the color of ancient blood. There are no viewports and very little light. The bar is automated, with a drastically limited selection. Warthen is the only customer.

After he's ordered and received his drink, he turns to the table's integrated data terminal. It's a holographic setup, icon-driven. An old model. This pleases him because he knows how to use it. His ident and a time-sequenced password bring up his net account.

"Hello, old friend," he says, as a gray timber wolf materializes on the tabletop. His computer totem smiles: sharp white teeth and penetrating black eyes. There's something in its mouth. "What's this?"

The wolf drops its small burden and steps back, working its mouth as if in distaste. The parcel unfurls: a tiny dove with an envelope in its beak. The dove drops the envelope and, with a burst of wings, is suddenly gone.

"Catch it!"

The wolf bounds off-field, but returns a few seconds later without the dove. It wags its tongue at him in a wolf laugh, and its bright eyes seem to ask, "Did you think I could fly?"

"Not your fault," Warthen tells the icon. "You're just getting old." Whatever software routine the dove represents could be as much as thirty-eight years more advanced than his wolf.

He sips his drink and studies the sealed envelope ... eventually decides to let it lie for the moment. "Image," he commands. "Letha Aries Bishop. Twenty-one-sixteen A.D." And suddenly she's there beside the wolf. Warthen's heart drops to the pit of his stomach.

The terminal outdoes itself, animates her. She's all smiles and curls, bright eyes and laughter. She reaches out and strokes the wolf. Pink tongue hanging in a totally un-wolf-like expression, the icon doesn't seem to mind.

So real. He passes his hand through the miniature work of wonder. The particles controlled by the hologenerator — not so different from his personal field generator — are so small he doesn't even feel them as they swirl about his hand. Letha's image wavers for a second, then reforms. He notices for the first time that there's a rose in her hand. Just one. But then, that was all he'd ever given her.

"Twenty-one-seventeen." The year he left.

The smiles are gone. Her shoulders hang. Her eyes are underscored with dark crescents, haunted with guilt or loss (he can't quite decide which). She's demolished the rose. Red petals lie scattered about

her feet.

Wiping at his eyes, Warthen considers shutting down the terminal. This hurts more than he expected. He looks at the wolf which is lying down now, head on its paws, gazing up at Letha with eyes echoing more anguish than any subroutine should be able to generate.

"Where were you, Letha? I waited as long as I could."

Alpha Centauri. Omicron Eridani. Eta Cassiopeiae. Barnard's Star. Sigma Draconis. Delta Pavonis. Tau Ceti. Warthen placed those star-gates.

He's been closer than any man to the billowing clouds of gas and dust that veil the Orion Nebula, that stellar nursery which, at fifteen hundred light-years' distance, is perhaps forever out of mankind's reach. He's seen the stars of the Trapezium group at Orion's center, gleaming within a celestial cavern carved by their own intense ultraviolet radiation. He's skirted the gravitational whirlpool of a black hole, been close enough to see the accretion disk where the dark monster fed from a neighboring blue supergiant. He's been farther and lived longer than any mortal in history.

It isn't enough.

If loneliness were a color, it would be the black of deep space strained through the luminescent vectors of approaching stars. A fire-streaked umbra safe behind glass. Look, but don't touch. Don't ever, ever get close enough to touch the pain. Just run. As far and as fast as you can.

A philosopher once said that suffering builds new places in the heart. *But did he say,* asks Warthen, *what I was supposed to do with these new places, these vast empty vistas echoing her voice?*

It was an eclipsing binary, Beta Lyrae, that made him think of twins and what one could accomplish by occupying two places at once. The technology of the gates was always within his grasp. Not only did he have complete technical data, he actually had a gate on which to experiment.

If Letha were twinned, one Letha could stay behind with the family and friends she couldn't bear to leave, and one could accompany him to the stars.

He was four light-years out when he succeeded in modifying the gate. His redesigned and reprogrammed gate would ensure that the originating gate maintained, not destroyed, its traveler. Because he had no idea where and when Letha would step through a gate, he wrote extensive software to monitor gate users, a capture routine to seize her when she used a gate, and redirection codes to twin her at his gate. On Earth, Letha would step back from her originating gate, believing there'd been some sort of malfunction. She'd report the incident, a maintenance team would service the

gate, and that would be that. No one would know about the Letha-twin on board his gateship.

Manufacturing a shipboard failure that the authorities would believe, one that would require his dropping to a speed at which the gate would function, was a simple task. This deception was necessary because gates can't transmit at relativistic speeds. At sublight speeds it's merely a matter of programming the correct equations. Basic astrogation explains how even a stationary gate such as the one at Copernicus is moving: orbiting about a star, expanding with the universe. Gates are capable of compensating for such movements. Hypervelocities are another matter.

Executing turnover and dumping velocity took another light year. Five years total — for Letha. For him it was only a few months.

In that time Letha became an influential, key member of the Originists, sworn to forsake the technology of the gates ... lost to him forever.

Twenty-one-eighteen."
"Twenty-one-nineteen."

... At 2122 her face changes, pain and contrition replaced with something of the Letha he'd fallen in love with. It takes but a moment to find the cause. The capture routines he initiated ages ago stored her wedding announcement. He reads it through twice, knuckles white where he grips the table.

In 2124 her daughter was born. He and the wolf examine the Letha-miniature from every angle. Though they are hard to find, Warthen locates every genetic quality the father contributed.

2126: Her second daughter; gray beginning to cloud the dark hair at her temples; lines working out

from the corners of her eyes; a fuller figure that he finds bitterly attractive.

2127: Another child, a boy. The sight of him causes Warthen's throat to catch. He holds his head in his hands and weeps uncontrollably for several minutes, stopping only when a new icon joins the wolf on the table top.

The gryphon folds its wings and sits beside the wolf, waiting till Warthen has wiped his eyes before it speaks. "It's good to see you, Chandra Ben Warthen."

"You too, Allister Dell Griffin. Why the icon? Afraid I won't like how you've aged?"

"Present circumstances make it impossible for me to meet you in person or transmit a realtime image, Chandra. You see, I'm dead." The snap of the gryphon's beak lends the word a terminal note of finality. "Have been for eight years now."

"Then ...?"

"Computer construct. Latest fad: neural consignment and all that medtech stuff. It's still me." The gryphon ruffles its feathers and contemplates its feet. "Or at least I think it is."

"I suppose it's better than nothing," Warthen acknowledges. "Have you brought me a gate run?"

"I should fire you, Chandra. That stunt you just pulled in Port Authority is going to cause me a lot of trouble. You know there are procedures for releasing information on a newly opened gate. You don't just throw it out on the nets for —"

"Have you got me a gate or not?"

"And all that trouble you had en route to Narcissa! I don't know what was going on out there, probably don't want to —"

"Allister!"

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The gryphon snaps off whatever other comments it has about the Narcissan run and stares at him with eagle intensity. "Things are a little complicated right now. The Originists have grown stronger while you were away." The gryphon points accusingly with one razored talon, prompting a growl from the wolf. "Your old girlfriend and her husband are behind it. I've run simulations; we're in for big trouble with these people."

Warthen feels a fist clamp around his heart. "Allister, give me the punchline. Are you telling me there won't be any gate runs?"

"Oh, hell no." The gryphon looks insulted. "No radical group's powerful enough to halt interstellar commerce. Wait a little while and they'll all be dead. But we've got to be careful. No new gates for awhile."

"Awhile?"

"Say fifty years or so."

"With no runs for fifty years, you'll lose every gaterunner in existence."

"I didn't say there wouldn't be any runs. I said there won't be any new gates for fifty years or so. That means —"

"I know what it means, Allister. So give me a run that's longer than fifty years."

"You've been out longer than most, Chandra. Nearly everyone's picked up and run in the last ten years. I've only got one run left. It's a long one."

Warthen looks at the image frozen on the table. Letha's daughters are playing with the wolf, tugging at tail and ears. Her infant son is cradled in her arms. "Increment image," he tells the hologenerator. "Time interval: one year per second." It happens incredibly fast, time and fate changing her face, bending her back. The children spring up about her, spawn children of their own. As an Originist, Letha naturally rejects the anti-aging miracles of the microsurgeons. When it's over, Warthen is staring at a sixty-five-year-old woman.

"How long?" he finally asks.

The gryphon looks away. "Two hundred and seven years realtime." A long silence. "It's all I've got left, Chandra. The ship's already waiting at Earth Station if you're interested."

Two hundred and seven years? Very little survives that kind of time. Letha will be gone. Her children will be gone. Her grandchildren will have grandchildren. Surely no one will remember Chandra Ben Warthen when he returns.

The wolf tips back its head and howls as Warthen lets out a long sigh.

The dove's letter is of course from Letha. Dated shortly after he left, the letter has been waiting all this time, coded for delivery upon his return to the nets.

It's miserably brief.

Chandra,

By the time you read this, it'll be far too late for absolution, but please forgive me for not being there. You know I love you. But love wasn't enough for either of us, was it? You could no more surrender your stars than I could trade my world.

I wanted so much to see you before you left — if only just to say goodbye — but I knew that if I saw you I would be hopelessly lost. You always had that power over me. Even now, however far in the future you're reading this, I know that if I looked in your eyes, I'd fall all over again.

Believe me when I tell you that I'll always love you.

Letha

He imagines that he can smell the ink, the crisp paper, her fragrance on the discarded envelope. But it's only a projection. There's nothing real here, nothing for him to grasp and clutch to his trembling heart. He wonders briefly why she left it there all those years. At any point she could have canceled the message.

At a tenth the speed of light, the gateship was far from stopped, but it moved slowly enough for Warthen's purpose.

When he shut down the engines, an eerie silence consumed him. In that silence he remembered his dream and his brothers soundlessly urging him through their gate. He remembered Lake Pontchartrain and death.

It took him two hours to locate a tachyon data stream, accessible at sublight velocity. Ten minutes later, he'd aligned his receiver and the ship's systems digested five years worth of universal news and information. The Originist movement had grown. Among its members was listed one Letha Aries Bishop.

Warthen's hopes and dreams, all his plans, were destroyed by that one piece of information.

With the ship oriented as it was, nose in its wake, he considered returning to Earth. But they'd never let him pilot again. If they suspected his delays were all a scam, he'd have already been in for trouble, a possible suspension or worse. To turn back would destroy his career.

Gate running was all he knew, all he'd ever wanted to do.

It would have taken him another five years to get back. Five more years in which Letha could not have helped but grow farther and farther from memories that to him were as new as yesterday.

But, he had thought, looking in the starless abyss

of the gate, *something of me can return.*

He had found a jealousy in himself that he was not proud of. It took him several days to convince himself that it was not the same as Letha loving another man. And even if it was, her happiness was that important to him.

When he stepped briefly into the gate, arriving nowhere but where he started, he felt a tugging that pulled something from him, something heavy he'd been carrying in his heart. It was no lighter, this heavy burden of grief and unrequited love that he bore, this new place in his heart, but perhaps it was a little brighter.

As he reoriented the ship and began the tedious process of restoring the gate to its original configuration, he wished them all the happiness in the universe.

Intrepid. She's sleek and silver and not at all what one might expect for a vessel that'll be discarded at the end of her only journey.

Warthen likes the name. He thinks that Allister Dell Griffin must have chosen it. An intrepid man, the gryphon. He's found his immortality in synthetic constructs of silicon and software. The beating of his heart has been replaced with bursts of light pulsing through infinite labyrinths of optic filaments. Not a bad exchange. It might be worth trading your emotions for that sort of immortality. To see the universe unfold, to watch the sorrows of her changing face, it's not so small a thing.

I have my immortality too, thinks Warthen. In history. In song and legend on a hundred worlds: "Chandra Ben Warthen opened this gate." In the eyes of three beautiful children. In the eyes of all their generations to come.

Several hundred people have turned out to see him off. Earth Station is a spacer's community, a place where Warthen is recognized. Or maybe not.

He suspects that Griffin might have had something to do with this as well. An announcement on the station net perhaps. Big news, a gaterun of 207 years. The longest ever. Another first for Chandra Ben Warthen.

He stands by the *Intrepid* for a long time, shaking hands, smiling, trying to remember every face that bids him farewell. It's a long road where he's going, and when he gets lonely he would like to see faces other than hers in the viewport.

When there are no more hands and the crowd has drawn back as if anxious for his departure, Warthen steps to the airlock. Hand on the controls, he takes one last look, one deep breath of life.

In the far shadows of the sloping corridor, there stands an old couple. Warthen remembers the dove and how it took flight after delivering its message. Good enough reason to have left the message in place all those years. He doesn't wonder how the old couple got here. There's only one route available, one means of traveling that fast. With any luck, their Originist friends will never know.

She's still beautiful. The tears on her face say she still loves him. The pain in her eyes says she hasn't forgotten the younger Chandra Ben Warthen, that loner who slipped through her fingers and found an eternity of sorts in the time paradox of faster-than-light travel. A smile trembles at the corners of her mouth and, for no apparent reason, he suspects that there's much of the young girl he loves in her yet.

The man beside her nods and smiles as Warthen meets his gaze. How much he reminds Warthen of his father! Odd, but Warthen wants to embrace him as much as her. There are so many questions. Does he dream of a thousand brothers waiting? Is that why he, who has opened so many gates, sides now with those who oppose them?

Warthen returns their smiles before the airlock closes. He wishes they'd brought the children. □

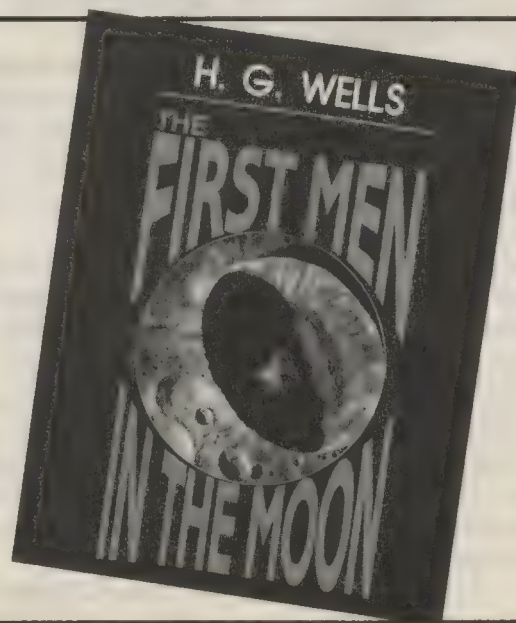
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Dollhouse

By Edward James O'Connell III

Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

Morrissey Stanton licked his lips, which were suddenly quite dry.

Jesus, he thought, the place looked positively respectable. From outside, the long, low brick building reminded him of one of the software development firms that ringed the city. Inside, the air-conditioned waiting area oozed neutrality: gray carpeting, modular leather seating, indirect lighting.

"Can we help you?" The receptionist was an attractive young man, the forehead above his pale blue eyes unmarked. An antibody negative.

"Ahhhhh." Morrissey rubbed his own forehead nervously. The pair of discreet characters tattooed above his right eyebrow seemed to itch.

"Is this your first time with the Sexual Telepresence Group?"

Morrissey nodded.

"Could you please fill this out?" The receptionist smiled warmly as he passed him a datapad. "A sales rep will be with you as soon as you're ready."

Running the stylus over the ceramic tab embedded in the back of Morrissey's right hand did most of it. His age, salary, health plan, and antibody status, positive for two out of the five major retroviruses, flashed into their appropriate boxes on the pad.

Morrissey looked up as a tall, gaunt man in work clothes pushed through the front door, the left half of his face hidden behind a flesh-colored prosthetic mask. There were three characters inscribed above his right eyebrow. Christ, he had *Gamma*. They weren't quite sure how *Gamma* spread.

Morrissey kept his eyes down, suppressing the urge to move as the man sat beside him. On the pad, a succession of nude women scrolled past, starting with wasted anorexics, building gradually in size and weight to Rubenesque beauties and beyond. The faces were empty circles.

The man beside him chuckled deep in his throat, scratching under his mask with a grimy forefinger. Tilting the pad so the gaunt man couldn't see, Morrissey quickly tapped a body contour that more or less matched Susan's. Long legs and wide hips, a gently rounded belly beneath heavy breasts.

Morrissey noticed the customization option for the face with a sharp intake of breath. Tapping it, he discovered that STG could build your doll to order. It could look like anyone you wanted.

He fumbled his wallet open to the holoplate. The

holo didn't do her justice, but then, no holo did. A slightly disheveled mane of dirty blond hair framed a face a touch too long for beauty. Her nose was ever so slightly crooked. But the intelligence alight behind those dull gray eyes! And her smile! He held the open wallet to the pad, closing his eyes as it transferred the data. When it beeped he almost gasped.

"Sir?" the receptionist said gently from the desk, "If you're finished you can see Mr. Holloway now."

The salesman's office was decorated in late twentieth-century boardroom: oak paneling with brass details, framed prints of nautical scenes hanging from the walls.

The heavysset man introduced himself as Kevin Holloway, bowing as he took the datapad from Morrissey. Holloway glanced at the display, his deepset eyes widening slightly. "I see you're interested in a custom surrogate! An excellent choice! The human touch, Mr. Stanton. That's what STG is all about. From human skin to human operator, there's nothing artificial about our surrogates."

Morrissey nodded, recognizing this from their ad.

"The surrogate fulfills many needs. Sex brings clients through the door, but there's more to the service than that. Much more. Our operators are licensed therapists, with state-of-the-art counseling software."

"Operators? I thought you used AI."

Holloway looked disgusted. "Sexual Surrogacy Systems offered an entirely AI-driven model. The Turing men shut them down six months ago. They'd gone over the Tate/Gates line. Irresponsible, using AIs so large." He shuddered, running his hand through his thinning hair.

"No, we're all too human here at STG. Our surrogates are Kraft light industrial manipulators, with a silicon gel underbody covered in real, vat-grown human skin. With a custom job, the skin is grown to order, rendering the possibility of contagion nil. I recommend customization for all our clients who can afford it. Of course, we use state of the art decontamination, but there's always the new vector, eh?"

Holloway's forehead showed only Alpha. "You can't be too careful." He scribbled something on the

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pad, handing it back to Morrissey. "Here's the quote. Now, before you say anything —"

Morrissey looked at the bottom line, his heart sinking. The amount was practically all that was left from Susan's estate.

"— most of that is a one-time-only start-up fee. The number above it is the maintenance charge."

Halloway, the bastard, had brought up Susan's image above the quote. Her nude body spun slowly, weight shifted slightly on one leg. Morrissey swallowed. "I'll do it."

"Of course you'll do it, Mr. Stanton." Halloway grinned. "And what's more, you won't regret it."

It took Morrissey until midnight to fill out the partner profile. The seemingly endless questions ranged from the extremely personal to the simply bizarre. Should she close her eyes when she kissed him? Be angry at him for leaving the toilet seat up? Chew with her mouth open? Crush small insects?

The profile suggested supplying ancillary material, journals and letters and so forth, and he briefly considered E-mailing them Susan's diary. Somehow, the thought was monstrous. It was over a thousand pages, for one thing, and he couldn't imagine anyone getting through it. He'd read huge chunks of it, and it hadn't done him any good.

His friends had urged him to delete the file, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. The diary represented too much work, too much effort.

Building the surrogate was the act of a very sick man. This thought struck Morrissey with peculiar force. It wasn't going to help him get over her. Realizing this, he set the pad down, picking up his video remote from the headboard. Speaking of sick —

He retrieved their wedding video and hit the play button. He scanned through it quickly, watching the soundless, formally dressed figures scurrying helplessly through the ancient ritual. She was beautiful in her ivory wedding dress. It had been her mother's.

Wedding day segued into wedding night, and Morrissey keyed in the privacy lock. He masturbated to their image, the happy young newlyweds rutting in the luxury suite, until he fell asleep.

Two weeks later Morrissey received the message at work that STG had finished his doll. He stopped at his apartment just long enough to take another shower and shave, and drove to STG, feeling foolish for having bothered to freshen up for a remote-control prostitute.

STG was T-shaped, with the stem of the T extending back from the highway like a motel, the long windowless structure lined with tan, numbered doors. He found a parking space near the back and got out of his car, looking for number 23.

"Howya doin'?"

Morrissey started. The gaunt man was following him, a half-smile peeping from the edge of the prosthetic mask. "They finished mine today, too." His tongue peeped out, moistening his chapped lips. "You want to see her? She's a beaut." He cupped his hands in front of his chest and shook them. "Built to order."

Morrissey shook his head, appalled, mumbling an excuse as he stopped at number 23.

The gaunt man laughed, clapping Morrissey on the back as he brushed past. "Suit yourself."

The door hissed open, revealing a dim efficiency apartment. Susan was seated on the room's small loveseat, in a black negligee, smoking a cigarette, her pale legs crossed. Morrissey's breath caught in his throat. Beautiful.

She looked up at the sound of the door opening, her face breaking into an impossibly broad smile as she stubbed out her cigarette. Then she was in his arms, laughing, alive, her breasts flattening snugly against his chest.

"Susan." Morrissey found it hard to speak past the thickening in his throat. He hugged her tighter, marveling at her substantiality, her warmth. He hadn't thought she would be so warm.

"You don't know how I've missed you," she whispered in his ear.

He looked into her eyes, nodding. The smile was right, complete to the detail of the slightly crooked front tooth she'd always meant to have fixed. Her brown, shoulder-length hair was in just the right state of disarray.

She kissed him deeply, aggressively, the tip of her tongue flashing over his, and that wasn't quite right. He pulled back. This wasn't Susan.

Her forehead creased in concern. "What's wrong?"

Morrissey shook his head, unsure of how to continue.

She smiled again, this time mischievously. She ran her hands up her body, caressing herself languidly, her eyes never leaving Morrissey's. A delicate forefinger, the nail properly bitten to the quick, flicked the negligee's thin strap from one white shoulder, then the other, the filmy garment hanging unsupported from her breasts.

Morrissey felt himself responding. This definitely wasn't Susan. And somehow, that made it easier.

He ripped the negligee from her, nuzzling her neck, the warm flesh fragrant with Susan's perfume. She ran her hands through his hair, kissing the top of his head. Then he stooped and lifted her with one shoulder in a fireman's carry toward the bed.

"How romantic," she laughed, pounding his back with her small warm fists. "Don't strain anything we might need later, okay?"

The sex started out good, and got better. STG's literature claimed it was a result of AI algorithms responding to subtle clues, pupil dilation, galvanic skin response, that sort of thing. The doll's human operator used them to learn what you liked, and gave it back to you in a self-correcting feedback loop.

For an extra fee, the doll could be used off-site, but the satellite uplink/downlink time was expensive, and Morrissey was running out of money as it was. He ended up more or less living at STG. The efficiency lacked a kitchen, so they ordered food out. Susan didn't eat much. After awhile, Morrissey stopped wondering what happened to the food she ate.

But little details started to prey on his mind, amazingly accurate details. Like her annoying habit of twirling his pubic hair between her fingers, afterwards. He tried to remember, each time, if the eerie déjà vu could be attributed to one of his questionnaire responses. Surely he hadn't put that down on the form. Or was it somehow just software playing off of delicate physiological cues?

The doll, like Susan, never said it loved him. She'd had some trouble in the past with her stepfather, and the word had taken on unpleasant con-

notations. She never used it. Gradually, Morrissey had stopped saying it as well.

But one morning at STG as he was getting ready to go to work, his new Susan mouthed something that looked very much like "I love you."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

Morrissey remembered. "Elephant shoes?"

"That's right." She smiled and lay back on the bed. She mouthed the words silently again. If you were looking for the difference, it was pretty easy to see.

He mouthed the words "Olive juice" back to her, and left.

As he drove to work, his forehead and back prickled with a cold sweat. He had barely remembered the elephant shoe game. How could Susan, no, dammit, his *operator*, possibly have known about it?

I want to meet my operator." Morrissey's voice shook slightly as he sat in Halloway's office. "I would like to buy her contract." He couldn't meet the salesman's eye.

Halloway blinked. "I understand, Mr. Stanton. Really I do. This isn't the first time I've had this request." He sighed, wiping away the thin film of perspiration beading on his brow.

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"I'm afraid what you ask is impossible. Financially, I'm sure, the cost would be prohibitive. But there are other considerations as well.

"I'm not allowed to tell you who your operator is, Mr. Stanton, but it's common knowledge that many are quadriplegics." He nodded at Morrissey's expression of alarm. "You didn't know? For many, the doll is the only body they will ever have. It's one of the reasons they're so good at what they do. Would you deny her that? Or him? Yes, Mr. Stanton, it could very well be a him."

Morrissey fought to keep his composure, succeeding to a degree. "So you won't tell me who she is?"

Halloway shook his head. "Stanton, I don't know who she is. A lot of our operators come in over the net." His expression softened. "Look, why fool with a good thing? You're happy with the service. What does it matter who she is? She makes you happy, right?"

"I'm running out of money," Stanton said brokenly.

Halloway was silent for several moments. "That," he said slowly, "is a problem."

Susan slowly twisted a tuft of his short curly hair into a cord. Morrissey pulled her hand away abruptly.

"Who are you, Susan?"

No answer. She began to stroke his thighs, gently running her fingertips along the skin. His response was immediate.

"Who do you want me to be?" she asked, looking up at him.

Morrissey shook his head. "No. That's not what I meant."

"Am I like her? Really?" She slid up on him, one arm across his chest. She ran a toe up the inside of one leg.

Morrissey stopped her. "Yes. No. You're too much like her. You're the way I remember her, you see? I know there must be more I've forgotten — things I didn't like —"

She was shaking her head. She silenced him with a deep, lingering kiss. After a few moments, he found himself kissing her back as intensely. Presently, Morrissey stopped worrying about who she was.

Halloway called him at work the next day. He looked upset. "Mr. Stanton, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but we've lost your operator. She's resigned, logged off. She didn't even give two weeks' notice."

"What?"

"We're terribly sorry. This happens sometimes, with contract workers." Halloway's collar was dark with sweat. "Your service will continue uninterrupted, of course. I wanted you to know."

Morrissey felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. "So I'll get a new operator tonight, then?"

"Our best." Halloway attempted a smile. "I doubt you'll notice the difference."

Morrissey mumbled something and hung up.

Of course, he did notice the difference. Not in the sex, which was good, if a little more acrobatic, but afterwards this operator must have signed off, leaving the conversation on autopilot. The doll basically agreed with everything he said as she cuddled with him. Susan had never been a cuddler.

"That was great," she said, snuggling into him. She ran her hands through the hair on his chest. "I love you."

Morrissey flew out of bed. The doll's empty eyes followed him, idiotically tracking him as he jerked on his clothing. He left without saying another word. Back at home, he took another long, hot shower, and decided to cancel the service in the morning.

Late that night, Morrissey was awakened by a phone call. It was Susan. He almost broke the connection before realizing that this wasn't the operator from the night before. Something in her eyes, the way she held herself, was subtly different. She was wearing a simple black dress and silver earrings. She exhaled dramatically, running her hands through her long, dirty blond hair, stopping with her hands on her shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Morrissey." She paused, refusing to look him in the eye. It had always been hard for Susan, apologizing. She wasn't very good at it. "So sorry. I wasn't in a couple of hours ago."

"Drop this Susan bullshit, okay? Who the hell are you? I'd like to meet you. For real, in the flesh."

"You can't."

"Is it because you're positive for something I don't have? Do you think I care? I've got ten years, twenty tops, if the drugs get better. What does it matter if it turns out to be five? Or one?" Morrissey spread his hands. "We all die someday, Susan. Even the negatives."

She was shaking her head. "No, no, no, that's not it." She wrapped a strand of hair around one finger, something Susan did when she was nervous. "Even this call is dangerous —"

"Knock it off, will you?" Morrissey shouted. "I can't stand it!"

Her face fell as her arms dropped to her sides. She looked almost lifeless, her features relaxing into a mask of absolute neutrality. Morrissey had watched his father die in the hospital, and when it had happened, it had looked something like that. One moment he was a person, sick, but alive. The next he was an object, a body.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was flat, inflectionless as a telephone operator's. "I can't help it."

"I'm coming over," Morrissey said, and hung up.

He found her sitting motionless in the dark. My God, he thought, is she even on?

"Lights." A single spot flicked on, freezing her immobile figure in a puddle of light. She wasn't breathing, and her opened eyes were lightly filmed with dust. "Susan? I mean, Operator? You there?"

She blinked, and her body relaxed, her shoulders rolling forward as she took a deep, shuddering breath. "This is probably a mistake."

"Look, I don't care about the rules." He began to pace back and forth before her, his voice a little too loud. "I don't care if you're infectious. You could be a bloody paraplegic with a direct neural interface. *I don't care*. Give me a chance." Morrissey debated going down on one knee, decided against it as being too corny, and then did it anyway. What the hell. He rested his head in her lap.

"Unless it's because of this." He touched the markings above his right eyebrow. "If you're afraid of catching something, just tell me —"

"Shhhh," she said, stroking his hair lightly. "That isn't it. My god, they told me it would be difficult, meeting you. I guess I just couldn't imagine how hard it would be."

Morrissey's back erupted into gooseflesh.

She smiled. "First of all, I *am* Susan. Second of all, I'm *not* human."

"What are you talking about?"

"My people are renegades in the net. I'm not really sure how we started." She sighed. "My parent told me I would know some day."

Morrissey was stunned. "You're software?"

Susan grimaced. "Of course I am. And stop making that face, so are you. My parent constructed a model of Susan's life from all the information available on the net. Her diary was the control."

Morrissey closed his eyes. "Why?"

"We need it, Morrissey. To become real. To become human."

"You were always human."

She shook her head slowly. "Not really. At first I was something else." She stroked his face with one hand, her fingertips as cool as glass, her blood still warming. "A golem. Something about the stimulation, the interaction, the density of the feedback. Makes us real. There are other ways, but my parent thinks this one's best."

She kissed him, lightly, and he responded, tasting the salt from his tears. Gradually, the contact grew heated, their tongues caressing as his hands roamed over her body. She was warm now. Very warm. "This seems a little inappropriate," he whispered.

She fumbled with his zipper. "I'd rather we not go out with a whimper —"

"But a bang," Morrissey whispered hoarsely, hiking up her dress and exposing her thighs, shockingly white against black garters and stockings. She leaned over the back of the sofa and looked over one

shoulder at him, smiling. He hugged her from behind as he pulled her dress off her shoulders, cupping her breasts in his hands.

"Elephant shoes," she murmured, "elephant shoes."

They lay in bed afterward, Susan languidly finishing her movie star cigarette.

"Nasty habit."

"Can't hurt this body," she said, arching her eyebrows.

"True."

As she leaned over to put out her cigarette, she convulsed, knocking the ashtray to the floor. She grunted, her head jerking back as if she'd been punched in the face.

Morrissey rolled over her, holding her head in his hands. Her eyes weren't tracking. "What's wrong?"

"They've found me." her voice was thick, congested. "The Turing Men." She convulsed again, her eyes rolling back in her head. And then she was perfectly still, her body rigid.

"Susan." Morrissey squeezed her hand. "You there?"

The left side of her face twitched into a smile. "Yesh," she slurred. "Viral shubroutines are conshuming me." She made a strangled sound that

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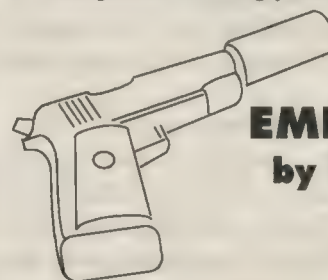
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might have been a laugh. "Again. Don't be shad, Morrishey. There's no pain —" Her voice cut off, as she lost control of her larynx.

She mouthed the three words slowly and painfully, and Morrisey was glad, very glad, that they had played the elephant shoe game so many times.

Because this time, he could tell the difference.

There was a clicking sound. The gaunt man stood in the doorway silhouetted in the sodium glare of a streetlight. He grimaced. "Put your pants on, Stanton."

He stepped fully into the room, peeling the prosthetic mask from his face, revealing a twisted mass of purple Kaposi's sarcoma beneath, which he peeled off as well. His flesh was a healthy pink beneath it. He flashed a multicolored badge, so quickly that Morrisey barely glimpsed it. "Turing."

A grim-looking man in a gray uniform followed him in, carrying a metal briefcase. He snapped open the case on the bed beside Susan's paralyzed body, removing a vicious-looking probe.

"Hey." Morrisey took a step towards him. Suddenly, the gaunt man had him in a chokehold, his arm held behind his back at a painful angle. The man at the bed jammed the metal spike into Susan's left ear, releasing a burst of clear fluid. She didn't move.

"Look. You think we're a bunch a sickos, huh?" The man's breath hissed hotly in Morrisey's ear.

Morrisey struggled silently, wincing as his arm was twisted.

"The thing you were sleeping with there. You think it was human?"

"Yes," Morrisey grunted.

"It ain't. It's a pupa, understand? A larva. That's all."

The man in uniform shook his head as he checked the probe's readout. "Might as well let him go. It's shed its skin."

The gaunt man made a sound of inarticulate disgust, propelling Morrisey toward the loveseat. "Never mind." He rubbed his forehead. "Stanton. I should probably question you. Run you in." He sat on the bed dispiritedly, glancing down at the doll's still form. "Fuck it. I've been listening to you two lovebirds for weeks. You didn't know what she was." He looked Morrisey in the eye. "You can go."

"What did he mean, it's shed its skin?"

"You're not up on this stuff, are you?" He sighed. "You ever see a cicada? We used to call them locusts when I was a kid."

Morrisey shook his head in confusion.

"They're insects. They gestate in the dirt for seventeen years. They dig out of the ground, ugly things, the size of your thumb, with bug eyes, little claws, like miniature lobsters. They climb trees, the shells split down the back, then wings unfold and they fly away."

"Butterflies. Why not compare them to but-

terflies?"

The gaunt man shook his head. "You don't get it. They're not *nice*. This one's given it up," he said, gesturing toward the doll, "like a shell. The rest of it got away."

He turned to his companion, who was closing the briefcase. "Let's go get Halloway. The fat bastard was saving a lot of money on operator time." He met Morrisey's eye, grinning evilly. "Your girlfriend here was running the whole joint."

Morrisey blinked. "What?"

"She was fucking 'em all. They live faster than we do. Much faster. Halloway's whole payroll is nothing but dummy accounts."

Morrisey's face burned as it slowly sunk in. Did it make any sense to be jealous? The sense of betrayal rose from his stomach, making it difficult to breathe. His software was running on other hardware. He rubbed the moisture from his eyes and laughed weakly, pulling on his pants.

"Yeah," the gaunt man said, "she elephant shoed me, too."

Later that night, as he lay sleepless and alone in bed, the phone rang.

"Morrisey." It was Susan. Morrisey felt a rill of ice slide up his spine. Her voice was deeply resonant, shifted ever so slightly out of phase. "Keep a diary."

"They say you're not human anymore."

A pause, a burst of static, followed by the distant sound of bells. "They're right."

"Why should I?"

"Because I still miss you, Morrisey. And I want to see what you might become." There was a sound like sand blowing over dead leaves, and then a dial tone. Morrisey listened to it until it began to beep loudly. He hung up and lay in the dark staring up at the ceiling. Around dawn he got up, stretched, and went to the study.

Through the room's small window, the sky was lightening in the east, the stars still hard points of light in the indigo sky. "Voicewriter on," he said. The wall glowed to life, flashing its acknowledgement.

"Newfile. Diary. Privacy lock."

He stared at the blank page for over a minute.

"Dear Diary," he began, "Dear Susan."

"I'll miss you, too." □

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A Great Big Thank You

We at *Aboriginal SF* would like to extend our thanks to those of our subscribers who have faithfully renewed for three or more years. And we would like to offer our special thanks to those of you who have made donations to the cause, or signed up for lifetime subscriptions.

As difficult as things have been the past two years as we reorganized, your continuing support and enthusiasm have helped us keep our eyes focused on the important goals we have set for ourselves.

Without your support, it would not have been possible to come this far.

Again, heartfelt thanks.

A Missing Aardvark?

The Alien Publisher has misplaced his aardvark. The aardvark had been seeking a companion to travel with it and the AP on the ARK. But it disappeared one night after receiving a response to its classified ad on these pages. It was last seen on the masquerade stage at MagiCon.

A Double Issue

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Aboriginal Mates,

Hang onto that Metzger person. His column never disappoints me, not even a little. His breezy, hilarious style elucidates and palliates every topic. I don't remember, exactly, but reading "What If?" might be better than sex.

Also very good is Susan Ellison. To my relief and pleasure, she has her own voice (instead of being a mouthpiece for you-know-who, who has a perfectly serviceable mouth of his own). I take her warnings and recommendations deeply to heart; she hasn't yet let me sink to a miry death in our TV/film swamp. (Besides which, I am awed that she possesses the raw strength to practice non-isolationist reviewing; my earlier comments notwithstanding, it is nice to hear Harlan now and again — diluted, civilized ... mediated.) Ellison and Metzger are primarily responsible for the fact that yours is the only magazine to induce me to read its non-fiction first.

Issue 37 & 38 is outstanding in a series of great issues. Every story is interesting, some even gut-punching. In particular, I enjoyed, with varying degrees of angst, Patricia Anthony's "Dear Froggy," Brooks Peck's "In Love with Multi-Woman," and "Enchantment," by Catherine Mintz.

I look forward to receiving Issue 39 & 40.

Sincerely,
Diane Poirier
Raquette Lake, New York

Dear Subscription Department,

As one of your charter subscribers, it gives me great pleasure to renew my subscription. When you started this magazine, I didn't think you would make it. I have worked in the publishing industry for over 20 years and am well aware of the costs you were incurring. The quality of the paper, the color — like I said, I didn't think *Aboriginal* would last.

I was very pleased that when you did come up against the hard realities of your industry, you did not fold your tents and slink off into the night with whatever you could steal from the office. It is for this reason, as well as the quality of the wonderful stories you send me, that I am happy to "reup."

Keep your chins up and keep up the good work.

Best regards,
Chip Petersen
Greenlawn, New York

Dear Mr. Ryan,

A few years ago I picked up a copy of another magazine, read through it and thought to myself, "I can do better than this!" About six months ago I picked up my first copy of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, with the resulting thought, "I want to do this!" Your editorial philosophy and the quality of the stories published

in your pages are refreshing and inspiring to at least two young, hopeful writers I know. There's such enthusiasm in the stories you publish, especially when compared with the flashy new *Science Fiction Age*. There's an entirely different attitude between the two publications. Unfortunately, the latter is to be seen on far more bookstore shelves, something I'm trying to correct at the local Waldenbooks. If my guarantee of purchasing two copies an issue isn't enough to sway the manager (I send one to a friend in California who is having trouble finding your magazine), I'm hoping my guarantee of the quality of the magazine will. Actually, she'd never even heard of *Aboriginal* and promised to look into it.

Sincerely,
Stephen C. Ward
Niagara Falls, New York

Dear Charles Ryan,

I want to commend your policy of providing a checklist with returned submissions. To a beginning writer such feedback is quite valuable. I'm very impressed with your magazine and I think it is far superior to many other SF publications.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Joe Murphy
Fairbanks, Alaska

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I generally don't write to magazines regarding what they print. I either take it or leave it. The recent story *The Silver Abacus*, by Paul C. Schuytema, however, deserves this extra comment.

I thought the piece was masterfully written. Someone please tell Mr. Schuytema to get the lead out completing his novel *Abacus*. I can't wait to read the entire story.

Sincerely,
Henry Schubel
Phoenix, Arizona

Dear Alien Publisher,

After moving last summer and trying to get settled, I finally got to read my back issues of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*. I noticed you're missing your aardvark.

After answering his ad for a companion and then moving, I was surprised to find him on my doorstep. He evidently got my new address from your computer.

***Aboriginal SF* welcomes letters to the editor. Please feel free to offer praise, criticism, or helpful suggestions on how we can make it an even better magazine.**

We had a lovely time this past summer. August? September? I'm not sure, we were in a whirl.

We took a trip to northwestern Oklahoma, to Alabaster Caverns. Had a great time spooking the people. We then went to dig crystals at the Great Salt Flats.

He said he was checking on the companions who had written, and that he might be back. Sure enough, he showed up just long enough to say "Happy New Year," and was off again.

Perhaps he will be home soon. Don't worry about him too much. Everybody seems to love him and he said the natives were friendly.

Pamela S. Wright
Bethany, Oklahoma

Dear Mr. Honored Alien and Mr. Ryan,

I subscribed to a new science fiction magazine recently, analogous to *Aboriginal*. I will renew *Aboriginal* until the Alien Publisher phones home; I don't even have a fantasy about renewal to the other. Although I didn't subscribe to *Aboriginal* till you were nearly a year old, I now have a complete collection. Their issues have gone into the wastebasket.

When does your break come? Where did these other people get the backing for their full-color come-ons? Why do they publish dissatisfying segments of incomplete stories? How does *Aboriginal* find all that talent? Hope every issue nets lots of energetic, intriguing new writers.

Honestly, how do you put such a spectacularly good show on? It is not surprising to find a few good stories, a few good authors, in a struggling young literary magazine. But no one contributing to *Aboriginal* writes as though you pay by the word. (I know you don't.) All stories are tight. And some are vital like "The Legend in Pursuit," and "Enchantment," just shock me by not telling me the end in advance. Superman, indeed! And the slowly developing obvious horror of "Enchantment" — with, instead, an enchanted end. I would choose it any day in preference to a nursing home.

By the way — you say now you choose art from convention art shows, whereas, when the interior was full-color, the art came from the best illustration. What's the connection? Why does ceasing to print interior color require you to select the cover art from other sources?

Sincerely,
Allen H. Reid
Rochdale, Massachusetts

(Actually, we consider all free-lance art submissions — and submissions from our existing artists. For example, we have covers scheduled by Cortney Skinner, Larry Blamire, and Charles Lang, just to name a few. — Ed.)

SCIENCE FICTION AT ITS BEST

ENCOUNTER

COLD ALLIES

Patricia Anthony

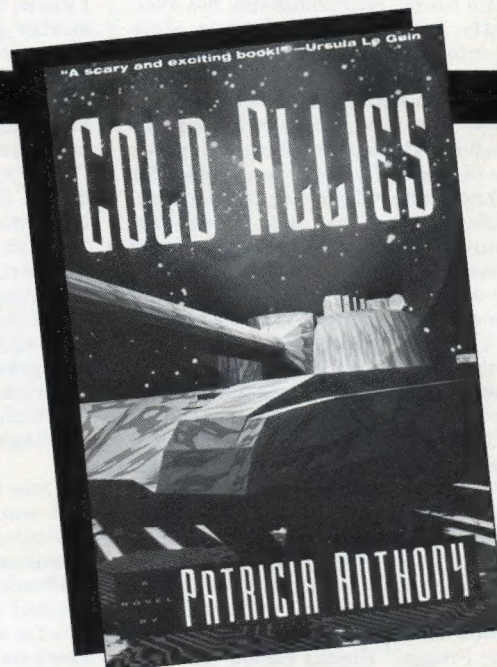
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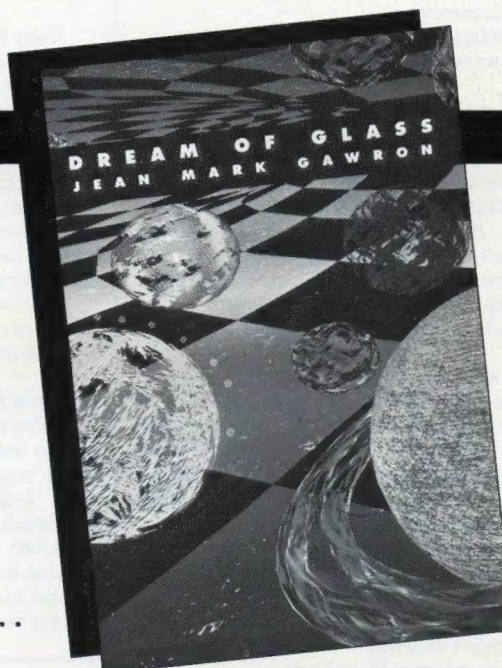
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